

Muscles are Better Than Magic! Vol. 2

DORANEKO

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MUSCLES
ARE
BETTER
THAN
MAGIC!

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY
DORANEKO

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Its jaws were way stronger than I'd expected. I punched that vicious guurdeck square in the snout. I mean, I didn't really unleash a ton of power or anything, but that guurdeck seemed surprised by my counterattack—the thing dashed away.

"Heh. Not bad."



MUSCLES **ARE BETTER THAN MAGIC!**

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Seven Seas Entertainment

MAHO? SONNAKOTOYORI KINNIKU DA! VOL.2

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Illustrated by Relucy

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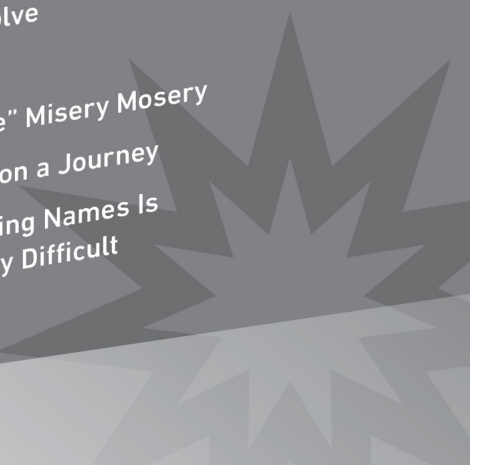
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Chapter 1: The Controversial Slime Jelly

EVEN A WHOLE NIGHT after the magic battle tournament, my blood was still raging out of control from the fierce battles with Voltemia and Leonir! I couldn't stop fidgeting as I walked through the streets of Mussen Morgeth.

"Man, it'd be awesome if they held another one of those magic battle tournaments or somethin'."

It had been so long since I'd been able to just cut loose and get wild like that. So much fun! There had to be another one soon, right?

"Seriously, Yuri, how much stamina do you *have*?" Filia grumbled to herself. Filia's this gorgeous silver-haired elf who travels with me, but her personality doesn't exactly match her appearance. She can be just a *liiiiittle* bit tacky.

"Tacky? I'll show you who's tacky!"

Oh, by the way...she also has the ability to read the minds of unsuspecting strangers. Which seems tacky, doesn't it? But now Filia was puffing her cheeks out all pouting-like, so I averted my eyes and, when that wasn't enough, started walking away. She crept closer in a desperate attempt to enter my field of vision, but nope! Wasn't gonna work. I was just gonna ignore her.

All of that was business as usual for the two of us, but, well, something just felt off today. More than a few people were looking over at Filia and I, whispering amongst themselves. I couldn't blame 'em, normally. We're a study in contrasts, the two of us, me with my beautifully bulging muscles and Filia's gorgeous elfishness. So different but so right for one another, like the peanut butter and jelly of hot people! But their reactions weren't *quite* that usual look, were they? Or was that just my imagination?

I listened carefully. Maybe I could overhear a conversation...

"Hey, ain't those people over there the ones from the magic battle tournament?"

"Yeah, they are. Man, they turned out to be the real deal! And

wait, no way. Ain't that the champ?!"

Ohhh, right. Guess all that fuss was because I was the champion and all. Maybe in a few days the commotion would die down and I'd have some peace. I sighed at the thought.

"Hm...?" And then I noticed it: a shop along the main street, packed to the brim with shoppers to the point that all the neighboring shops looked practically out of business. "What's that about...?"

I strained my eyes to look closer. What was that, some kind of banner?

"Slime Jelly" it said. The heck was that supposed to be? I squinted up at the banner, curious.

"Huh? Oh, wow! Slime Jelly, hm?" Filia had followed my line of sight, and now we were both gazing at the shop.

"You know what that is?" I asked.

"Only that it's stirred up quite the controversy in the royal capital. But a store in Mussen Morgeth, now *that's* surprising."

"It's controversial? That's, uh, oddly unsettling."

"And tempting, wouldn't you say? Shall we try some?"

"I'm good either way."

"Marvelous—let's give it a whirl, then! To be honest, I've been curious for a while now!" I could practically hear Filia buzzing with excitement, and all because of what just seemed to me like any other treat. Then again, she got a little like this for all of those other treats—and food in general. Big eyes, tiny stomach.

Filia and I queued up at the back of the line in front of the store and, almost immediately, the guy in front of us whipped around.

"Aha! If it isn't my old pals Yuri and Filia!" Babandongas beamed at us. "Talk about my lucky day, eh? Not just anyone gets to say they're friends with an almighty champion!" He gave me a playful nudge with his elbow.

"Guess not. What are you doing here, Babandongas?"

Babandongas never seemed like the kind of guy who'd be a regular at a place like this. But then again, you couldn't judge that stuff by appearances. Maybe he had a real sweet tooth. Either way, I supposed Babandongas could like what he liked no matter how he

looked.

“Well, my sweet angel has been saying for a while now that she wanted to try this jelly stuff. She did her best in the tournament, so I promised I’d treat her to some as a reward.” Babandongas briefly glanced over his shoulder. Voltemia peeked out meekly from behind his large back.

“H-hello, Lia. Hello, Yuri.” Voltemia gave us a bow.

Instantly, Babandongas burst into tears. “Hey! Hey, did you all *see* that?! The way she looked up at you like that, and her eyes were all—and she—aahh, she’s the cutest!”

“Big Brother, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“No, no, Babandongas,” said Filia with a serious nod, “I know exactly how you feel.”

Babandongas gasped. “You do, Filia?!”

They just couldn’t help themselves, huh? Complete suckers for cuteness. For Voltemia’s part, she seemed completely bewildered.

I grimaced. “Sorry for my traveling partner here, Voltemia.”

Voltemia’s eyes widened slightly. “Y-Yuri, you’ve got to be the sanest, most decent person here.”

“N-no way!” Filia cried in horror. “Saner than *me*? I’ve never lost to Yuri at anything, never in my entire life! Shock and horror!”

Saner than her? Jeez, Filia was *really* underestimating me.

“Yuri, you...” Babandongas cried, also in horror. “Do you have your eyes on my little Voltemia?! I’ll never allow it! I, her beloved big brother, will never allow it!”

I don’t know why I say stuff sometimes when, half the time, it’s like everybody else is speaking a different language.

“At any rate,” Filia continued, “you two are quite close, eh? For siblings, that is. I mean, you’re *very* close— isn’t that just a bit odd?”

Babandongas cracked a pleasant smile and pulled something out of the bag of holding on his hip. “Check this out.”

Whoa, it looked like some kinda photo album with pretty blue binding. Notably, for a half-second I thought it might be a dictionary, it was so thick. And lining this book, page after page after page, were

photos of a meek-looking little girl with bright azure hair—in other words, countless photos of Voltemia.

“Whaddya think?” said Babandongas. “Just the cutest widdle hugbug, ain’t she?”

“Do you carry that with you all the time?” I asked, squinting down at the pictures. I mean, she was definitely way adorable, but, uh... The more I looked at her, the more I noticed how totally different she and Babandongas looked.

“Of course!” Babandongas said with sparkling smile. “If you ever catch me without this—ha! See, I had you going there for a sec, didn’t I? Because out of all the times I’ve never had this on me, not *one* of those times have *ever* happened.”

“Wow. You *are* hardcore.”

“Dedicated, even,” added Filia.

“Heh. It’s an older brother’s job to protect his little sister. Dedicated from birth, I say!” he exclaimed, and he put a whole lot of effort into making it sound cool. It was a real moment. Good delivery, cool pose, pretty memorable.

But he was also saying these sappy things while staring down at a photo album filled with pictures of his little sister, so I can’t say he landed it, exactly.

“Isn’t she cute?” he added, “Come on, ain’t she? Here, look at this one! Dimples! Oh yeah, and this one too, getta a load of this one—but no, nope, even better is this absolute classic from four years, six months, fifteen days, three hours, and sixteen minutes ago. Ah, memories!”

“I-I see,” said Filia vaguely.

“She, uh...” I pulled back the tiniest bit from Babandongas as he went on and on about this picture or no, actually, that other one right there. His memory was almost as extraordinary as it was sister-oriented. “She really is pretty dang adorable, isn’t she?”

“Hey, you guys *are* looking, right? Okay, now we gotta maximize this cuteness here. See, Voltemia looks even cuter if you look at her a little more directly, from this angle.” Babandongas held his fingers out, making a little square to demonstrate. “Not that it’s really that big of a deal, because Voltemia’s just the cutest from every single angle ever

invented! In fact, how weird would it be if you guys were looking from the same angle? Okay, Yuri, you take a look from the left, and Filia, you look from the right. (You're a few degrees off, there. Aaaaand good.) What do you think? Of her cuteness?"

I was less thinking and more wondering when or if Babandongas had taken a breath.

"Big Brother," said Voltemia, blushing now, "you're incorrigible..."

Maybe she was blushing because we were looking at her pictures, or maybe it was because Babandongas was so enthusiastic.

Either way, seeing that, Babandongas crouched down and looked Voltemia in the eye. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so, so happy to see you growing up, Voltemia, I can't even hold it in. You lost yesterday, yeah, but you tried your absolute best. I just need you to know: Your big brother is mega, uber proud of you."

"Um...thank you." Voltemia definitely didn't look upset as her brother patted her head. Huh. I guess, even if he got pretty carried away, he was a good brother after all? "Shall we be going, Big Brother?"

"Yeah! All right, see ya later, you two!"

With smiles on our faces, Filia and I watched the two of them walk into the store ahead, and a few minutes later we were guided into the store too. On a quick scan, most of the people inside were eating some kind of weird, unidentifiable light-blue thing. The rumored Slime Jelly? There were two empty seats next to each other, so we sat down together and got ready to find out.

We ordered two servings of Slime Jelly from a waiter, then sat and waited. After a while, it came, and well, it sure was...slime? It wasn't blotchy, but it was light blue all over. It looked jiggly and soft, wobbling around on the plate. Slightly deformed as it was, it certainly looked like slime. No wonder it was the talk of the town.

I mean, after all, looks do matter, ya know? I don't really mind myself, but probably lots of people out there would rankle at the thought of downing a Slime Jelly.

"Oh my goodness, Yuri, can you believe how *cute* it is?" Filia nearly squeaked.

I could hardly believe it. “C-cute?”

“Yes, cute! Come now, don’t you think so? I mean, it’s so positively adorable—of course it would cause a stir!” she replied.

Come to think of it, the whole shop brimmed with ladies positively squealing with glee. Was...was this cute? Was it...was it infamously cute? The shop had changed it from the original version, according to Filia. Apparently, at first, Slime Jelly had been served with its eyes and mouth intact. After some focus testing and changes and whatnot, the shop had settled on the current look, which was still, uh, impactful, I’d say.

“Eh he he, it looks so yummy!” cackled Filia. She had a wicked grin on her face as she thrust her spoon into her wiggly prey.

Calling something cute over and over and then eating it? How, um, incredibly psychopathic, right? Or maybe not, because the other people in the store didn’t seem confused at all. I guess I was the weird one.

“Has my own common sense abandoned me?” I whispered to the universe.

“What in the world is the matter with you, Yuri? You’re usually so full of bravado all the time, and now—what, you’ve been defeated by a Slime Jelly?” Filia sighed, and (mid-sigh) shoveled a spoon of Slime Jelly into her mouth. Instantly, Filia’s silver eyes widened, her expression changing to that of pure ecstasy. “Yuuuummy! Yuri, ohmigosh! It’s the yummiest!”

“Huh, that so?”

Filia wiggled her hands up and down excitedly in front of her chest, as if the excitement was overflowing from her stomach to her fingers. Well, if Filia the Foodie said so, I was sure it had to be delicious, so you know? Why not. I decided to give the Slime Jelly a try.

When I pushed my spoon against the jelly, the taut elasticity of it bounced my spoon back, but when I dug the spoon *into* the jelly, it went through smoothly. The elasticity had been a mere illusion!

The translucent light-blue lump jiggled and wobbled. It did look tasty, now that I thought about it. I brought the Slime Jelly to my mouth. The first thing on my tongue was cold. Then a smooth, slippery sensation slid through my mouth. It was...

“Oh. Yep. Delicious.”

Certainly worthy of its reputation, just sweet enough to not be sinful, and refreshingly cool to the taste. Also (if you ignored the fact that it was a monster) it actually looked nice and juicy! No wonder it was popular. Filia nodded happily at my impressions.

“I know, right?! All right, I’ve made an executive decision: more Slime! Waiter?” Filia called, and soon enough she had Jelly #2.

“Are you actually going to be able to finish that?” I asked. Filia’s eyes were always so much bigger than her stomach.

“I can definitely eat it. I mean, look how delicious it is!” she replied with a smile. Well, they weren’t big portions. Maybe Filia could manage it.

A mere ten minutes later, Filia gazed down at her half-eaten mound of Slime Jelly, a grim and haunted look weighing heavy upon her elven features. “Yuri,” she whispered.

“Yeah, I mean, I know what you’re gonna say, but what’s up?”



“I can’t...” Filia gazed listlessly into space, defeated. “Can’t eat any more...” Now she closed her eyes and gently, slowly shook her head from side to side, utterly defeated. “The deliciousness... I was carried away, Yuri. Two was too much.”

“Told ya so.”

“Y-yes, but, well, sweets go into a separate stomach, Yuri. It’s elven biology.”

Sounded just slightly questionable to me.

“You couldn’t finish it, though.”

“You’re right. I have no answer for that, Yuri... I have nothing but tormented silence, and maybe a tummy ache.” Filia hung her head low, completely spent.

I looked at the mound of remaining Slime Jelly. Almost half of it was left, but the Slime Jelly was as jiggle and lustrous as ever.

“You’re not gonna eat that, then? Because, uh...”

“Oh, you have room? Then please, go ahead.”

“Neat.” I scooted her Slime Jelly toward me and put it in my mouth. Ah, love that slippery, sweet, good stuff. But then—

“Eek!” went Filia, rather suddenly. She stared down at the Slime Jelly, her cheeks crimson for, um, some reason?

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, it’s just...um, well, it’s rather like an indirect kiss, isn’t it...?” Filia stammered. “I-I, I mean, accidentally, of course!”

Filia blushed, shaking her head and waving her hands. It was a new level of Filia flusteredness.

I furrowed my brow. “I don’t get what you’re all upset about. I mean, an indirect kiss doesn’t seem like a big deal. Just a normal thing.”

“Normal...? *Ahem.* I-I see. Y-yes, I suppose that for the transcendently beautiful elf we all know and love, Filia, this sort of thing is perfectly normal, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I figured. I mean, back when I was in the forest, I ended up eating the same prey with a bunch of monsters all the time. It’s the same for you, right?”

The only absolute rule of the forest is the survival of the fittest.

The weak are food, and the strong eat. I couldn't count the number of times monsters had tried to steal the prey I'd caught. If I wasn't careful, they'd take a bite of my food and attempt to take it with them. More than once, they'd fought me off and succeeded.

"Yeah, yeah, I've also had to share prey with monsters... Pssht, *no*, what are you talking about? I've never done anything like that!"

Whoa, really? Never? I tilted my head.

"Wait, did you *really* go through that? Like that's personal experience?" Filia sounded a little freaked out for some reason.

I nodded, taking another hulking bite of Slime Jelly.

"Well, you *are* you, after all, Yuri," said Filia with a sigh. "But really, now, putting me in the same category as monsters?"

"You are you, after all, Yuri"? What's that supposed to mean? Is that, like, philosophy or something?"

Filia didn't react. She just stared into my eyes. When I looked at her straight-on, directly, I had to admit that wow, her face was so remarkably beautiful. It was as if the Goddess of...of Beautiful Goddesses had descended into the world.

I blinked. "Um...what?"

But no matter how beautiful or cute Filia was, it still got kind of awkward being stared at like that. As I took the last bite of my jelly, I asked Filia what she was getting at. Then, she opened her lush, plump lips.

"Yuri, if you're not bothered by indirect kisses, why are you embarrassed about regular kisses?" she asked.

At which point I burst into a whole bunch of totally unexpected hacks and coughs. Jeez, what kinda question was that?! "W-well, of course kissing is embarrassing! That's obvious! I mean, it's *kissing*! Like, lips to lips! It's so shameless!"

"Oooh, you don't usually hear people say 'shameless' these days. How very innocent of you, Yuri," she teased.

The Slime Jelly? Sweet and delicious. The teasing from Filia afterward? Not so much.

Chapter 2: With Lightning Speed

INSIDE THE INN, the air in the room was stagnant—all the windows and doors closed. Filia wasn't looking at me at all, either. She kept staring at the floor. An unusual tension hung in the air.

"So, this is the end, huh...?" Filia muttered, gazing down.

"Can't we just...start all over again?" I knew that was impossible, but I couldn't help but ask.

"I'm...sorry, Yuri," Filia replied in a detached, matter-of-fact way, like an admonishment. "This was what we'd decided in the beginning, right? So, I have no choice...tsk!"

She wanted to be detached, but every word grew more intense, as if her emotions were overflowing.

"But, this is too much—"

"I'm sure you knew the end would come someday too, Yuri. You knew that, and still we've continued on with this together until now. Am I wrong?"

That was a good argument. Too good for a comeback.

"Ugh. No, you...aren't wrong. All right, I get it. Let's get this over with," I said.

She nodded. "Yes," she said. Smiled gently. "Let's finish this." And

She tossed the dice, they went tumbling, and boom—she got a six. With a diabolical grin, Filia tapped her piece across the gameboard. "Goal! I win!" she exclaimed. Filia threw both of her arms up in the air in a victorious cheer.

I'd lost our game of backgammon. "Impossible... Tch! I, an intellectual muscle man...lost?"

"I'll hold you to your promise now. How about we take on the simple request today?" Filia grinned triumphantly.

A simple request or a difficult request? Filia and I hadn't been

able to decide which one to accept, so we decided to leave the decision up to whoever won this great game of wits.

“I lost...” I moaned into the void. “I lost...”

Filia grimaced. “Yuri, seriously, just how depressed *are* you?”

“I lost to Filia, of all people...” The horror!

“Hey, hold on just a second, you lost t—what exactly is that supposed to mean, Yuri?!”

“All is lost...”

“Hello? Earth to Spaceman Yuri? What was *that* supposed to mean?!”

After some deep reflection, I finally acknowledged my defeat, and we prepared to go out and handle the request.

“By the way,” I said, “you are incredibly good at backgammon.” I felt like she only ever rolled sixes when we played.

“There’s a trick to it,” replied Filia with a proud chuckle.

I couldn’t really imagine there was anything like a trick to it, but that was probably just sore loser talk.

“Now, shall we be going?” she said.

“Sure, let’s go.”

With that, we left the inn and went out into the city of Mussen Morgeth.

We’d accepted a request from someone who wanted a monster nest removed from their house. Requests within the city were pretty low-difficulty and boring, but I’d lost the game, so I didn’t have a choice.

Filia and I headed to the client’s house in the residential area on the outskirts of the city. The subject of the request was apparently some bee-like monster called a “monbee.” They’re considered invasive, just flying on in and setting up shop wherever they feel like it. They’re also about the size of a person’s palm, which makes them quite large compared to a regular bee but pretty much a small fry when it comes to

actual monsters.

As an intellectual muscle man, I naturally acquired this valuable intel well before we made contact with the enemy.

“Hold on, Yuri, isn’t that all information *I* collected?” asked Filia.

“Whoa, hey, don’t go peeking around in my head! Besides, Filia, here’s the thing: Did you research the information? Definitely. But now that I *understand* the information, I officially qualify as a Certified Intellectual Muscle Man.” I released the muscles in my arm and clenched my fist. Ah, the beauty of these muscles! And every single one of them, intellectual as hell.

Filia blinked. “If that’s what ‘intellectual’ means, I feel like that’s a fairly low hurdle for—”

“Hey, we’re here.”

“Well, okay.”

The client’s residence was a single building home in a residential district where about thirty feet separated each home. Pretty tranquil, I’d say.

The client stood in front of the house, waiting for us to arrive. “I’ve been expecting you. Thank you very much for coming.”

“No prob.”

“No prob indeed. I’m Filia, and this is Yuri. Thank you very much for offering us this job.”

After a brief greeting, the client led us to the monbee nest.

“It’s in the garden?” Filia confirmed.

“Yes. Unfortunately, they’ve settled in a corner furnished with magic stones,” said the man, pointing toward the back of the garden. “Think so, anyway.”

There, a hive about the size of a storeroom encroached on the wall, and disgustingly huge monbees hovered all around it.

“Whaaauughhh?!” Filia shrieked unintelligibly...but it wasn’t hard to decode that one.

“Jeez,” I mumbled, “they’re huge...”

They were so huge, in fact, that they didn’t even resemble normal bees anymore. They must’ve been a foot long, easy. On top of that, their

wings and bodies were all out of proportion.

The horde of monbees made a loud, abrasive buzzing sound as they went about their bzzzness, which was pretty nerve-wracking. Just one look at them definitely spiked my blood pressure.

“Magical energy is food for a monbee,” explained Filia, looking a little less pale now. “After feeding on all the energy of the abundant magic stones around here, they’ve become...*this*.”

So because they could eat way more magical energy here than they normally did in the wild, and because they had none of their natural predators around, they’d grown huge.

(By the way, a magic stone is actually an organ from inside a monster’s body, kind of like their storehouse of magical energy. They’re widely used as a power source for magic tools because they can hold magical energy. Cool, eh?)

“Well, we can’t really do anything about them anymore, it’s all so *much*, and...” The client trailed off, voice shaking.

Understandable. With monsters that size in your garden, you could hardly go about your daily life. We needed to assuage our client’s worries.

I pounded my chest with a big ol’ confident, vigorous smack! “Leave it to us. Now that we’re here, you can relax. Right, Filia?”

“Indeed. Please relax and evacuate from the area for the time being. I believe we should have this taken care of in roughly an hour,” announced Filia. She had a smug look on her face, as if she were bursting with self-confidence.

“Really? Thank you so much!” the client exclaimed. He looked so happy as he went back into his house—I guess our good vibes were contagious!

“Yuri...” said Filia, once the client was completely out of sight. “Yuri!”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“We couldn’t possibly, um, just *not* exterminate them, right?” Her

smug look was now a distant memory. Filia's cheeks were twitching, and she made a couple attempts to smile that collapsed on her face. Yeah, I guess we couldn't afford to look anxious in front of our client.

"Depends. Are you about to go up to that guy and say something like, 'I tried to act cool, but in the end I couldn't do it?' Because then, sure, we could just get outta here."

"Ah, cruel fate," said Filia with a little, possibly fake, snuffle. "We have no choice but to exterminate these awful beasts, I suppose. The transcendently beautiful elf Filia could never permit such a thing to live!" she cried, holding her small fist in front of her chest.

"Yeah, sure. I mean, I can do this on my own, if this is really that big a problem. You just sit this out."

When it comes to fighting, it's fun for me even if I'm going it alone. Even if things look bad, I can usually just finish it myself.

But Filia shook her head. "As long as I'm getting paid, then... I am bound by professional obligation."

I could respect that answer, but she looked downright unwell now.

"Hey, you okay...?"

"If I die," she whispered, "please scatter my ashes to the winds..."

"Hey, c'mon, let's not get all doom and gloom before we start, ya know?"

At last, Filia and I decided to exterminate the monbees.

"Hooah!"

When I attacked the mega-hive with my Pistol Punch, the monbees sensed the danger. They swooped out from the hive, one after another. Must've been something like sixty—no—seventy of them, I'd say. Honestly, it was a pretty freaky sight, and that's coming from me. Sure, I could handle these guys, but I wasn't particularly psyched about it.

Filia groaned, trembling with fear. "There's so many..."

“I mean, yeah, they’re gonna keep coming. We just gotta do our best.” It wasn’t like the monsters were going to wait for us to get ready either. “C’mon, Filia. They’re coming!”

I blasted my Pistol Punch right at the center of the monbee swarm. Some of them fell to the ground. The rest of the swarm spread out over a wide area and surrounded us.

“Don’t come near me!” Filia shrieked. “Don’t! Dooooon’t!”

She blasted magic spells at the monbees as they swooped down on us, one spell after another, pretty much all around her. The monbees weren’t even able to get near her, with how hard she was going. Surprisingly, her method of fighting—not thinking at all and completely ignoring efficient use of magical energy—actually sped up our monster-killin’ rate.

Being calm at all times isn’t always the optimal choice. It’s moments like this that make fighting interesting. At this rate, I could see Filia carrying out the request well enough even on her own.

All right, now that wouldn’t do. I’d let myself get distracted by Filia, but now I was ready to rock on this monbee swarm.

“Awesome work, Filia, but I ain’t gonna lose to you!”

I mean, at this rate, I wasn’t gonna get any credit for myself, and I couldn’t have that. I fearlessly charged headfirst into the swarm of monbees.

A few minutes later, after punching the last monbee into chunks, I confirmed that we’d completed the request.

“All done,” I said aloud.

“I-I can’t do this anymore...” Filia wheezed, slumping down to ground on the spot.

Guess she’d pushed herself too hard and been overwhelmed. Not that she couldn’t handle a little exertion at her level. If I had to guess, I’d say the cause of this collapse was the mental anguish induced by all those buzzy little dudes.

“Hey, yo, Filia, you okay?” I held out my hand.

Filia grabbed it (man, she was soft!) and pulled herself back up. “S-somehow, I live. Forget about me, though. I mean, I saw you get stung several times over. Yuri, are you all right? It’s hard to imagine you’d lose to those monbees, but...”

“Oh, that? I kinda wanted to see what it felt like to be stabbed by their stingers, heh.”

“You *what*? Y-you let them sting you on purpose?!”

“No, I *tried* to let them sting me. But my skin was just too tough for ‘em. Their stingers snapped clean off.” I picked up one of the stingers on the ground and sighed. I thought it would’ve made for good training, but I guess a monster of monbee caliber wasn’t a good training partner, no matter how big it got.

Filia blinked. “Yuri, is your skin made of metal or something?”

“Metal?” I shook my head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Filia. My muscles are way tougher than *metal*!”

Come on, check out these babies! Well-developed muscles like this wouldn’t get pierced by a wee little needle. I’ve got natural armor—the supreme armor of muscles!

“I see,” said Filia flatly. “Delightful.”

“Hey, that’s not even specific. You usually, uh... What’s up?”

“I’m tired of being surprised. I’ve had enough. There’s no point in thinking too deeply about you, Yuri.”

Oh. I see. “Got it. You’re adopting that old saying: ‘Feel, don’t think!’ Not bad, Filia.”

“What I *think*,” said Filia with a deep, defeated sigh, “is that we’re done here.”

Heck yeah! We’d completed the request, and our client was ecstatic. It didn’t really serve as training for me at all, but it’s great to have a happy customer.

With our request done, we walked back to the city center of Mussen Morgeth. The sun hung high in the sky, shining down on our

backs. Filia wiped her brow. “Whew, that request sure was exhausting, wasn’t it?”

“Hold on, you’re saying you’re tired?”

“And you’re not? You must have endless stamina, Yuri. You’re like a machine. Seriously, they should put you to work dredging a never-ending swamp or something.”

“Hey, wait a second. That’s a kinda off-putting way to say it, don’t you think?”

“Pffft,” replied ever-elegant Filia, raising her arms and bending her knees. What was *that*? Wait, was she imitating what it would be like if someone jumped into a swamp?

Anyway, uh... I suppose it would have been fine if we just continued on back to the inn, but it was still midday. We easily had enough time to stop off somewhere. Just as I was thinking that, Filia turned toward me.

“Oh, how about we get our fortune told? It’s free, apparently!”

Filia pointed toward a pyramid-shaped tent that had a sign with the words “Manor of Divination” written on it and, below, a “free offer.” A...manor? This tent was a manor? It also looked conspicuous surrounded by buildings on the street. Creeped me out, all of that.

Oh, and I guess it also emitted strange purple light in broad daylight, which seemed a little questionable.

“I’ve always wanted to have my fortune told at least once,” said Filia. “It’s fine if you just come along and watch, Yuri. Will you come with me?”

“Sure. Let’s go.” I’d lost to Filia today, so that made her the boss.

With that in mind, we walked into the tent. Upon entering, we met a plump woman, maybe in her late thirties, with purple hair done up in curls. It was a little hard to see inside because of all the purple light, so for a second I thought she was some kinda muscle lady. Alas, it turned out she was just kinda plump. Ah well.

“Welcome, I am Madam Inferno” said the fortune-teller woman in exactly the kind of voice you’d expect. She gestured grandly at Filia. “Do you wish to have your fortune told?”

“Yes, please. I’m Filia.” My companion sat across the table from

the fortune-teller, facing her.

“Ah, yes... Filia, what kind of fortune would you like me to read for you today?”

“Um, let’s see... Can you read my luck fortune, maybe? I want to see what kind of luck I’ll have in the future.” Filia bounced cheerfully, her shoulders shaking as she bobbed up and down.

The fortune-teller shook her head. “The future? Alas, I’m afraid I cannot. I can only read the past.”

“I see...” Filia mused.

A fortune-teller...who could only read the past? Did that even count?

“Hmm. Well, in that case, what kind of fortune *can* you read?” Filia asked.

Yeah, I wouldn’t know what to ask for either after being told this lady could only read our past. But the woman seemed used to reactions like Filia’s.

“Ah, allow me to explain,” she said in a calm, fortune-tellery voice. “The majority of the requests I receive are from souls wishing for more insight on their own personality. One may notice more things about oneself if those things are pointed out by another person.”

So it was a personality test? I guess that *was* a kind of astrology...

“Okay, then,” said Filia, “let’s do that!”

At that, the fortune-teller produced a fist-sized crystal ball from beneath the table and began to look into it. I detected a change in the atmosphere as she did so. She was no phony. My muscles could sense it.

After silently gazing into the crystal ball for a few moments, she let out a light sigh and looked away from the ball. She stroked her plump chin once with the back of her plump hand, and then plump words began to pass through her plump lips.

“I see...I see that you have difficulty being honest about your feelings. I see, too, that while you appear to have the skills to take care of yourself, you are still a child in your heart of hearts. If you find someone with whom you can share those hidden parts of yourself, bringing them to the light, you will no longer have to push yourself so hard.”

Filia nodded in response, looking quite serious. “Hm. Hmm? *Hmmm.*”

The woman glanced over at me, then. “Although, young lady, you do seem to be quite compatible with him... Well, you’ve only known each other for a short time. You trust one another, but, girl, you appear to be hiding something.”

Filia nodded sagely. “I see. Because I’m so smart, I get along with Yuri despite the fact that he’s so different from me in every possible way?” She glanced back at me, looking self-satisfied.

I nodded sagely too. “What can I say? I’m an intellectual muscle man.”

At that, Filia slumped her shoulders in apparent exasperation and made a little snort. Hmph.

As for the fortune-teller’s last ominous little line? Ehh, no big. Everyone has a thing or two to hide. That was nothing to be particularly concerned about.

“The matter hidden within you is rooted deep. I’m not sure if it’s my place to say anything, but... You have some new little secret today, don’t you?” The fortune-teller raised her eyebrow slightly, shifting her gaze away from the crystal ball and toward Filia with wide, fortune-tellery eyes.

Filia looked utterly bewildered. “Today? I can’t really remember anything in particular...”

“Oh my, is that so? It seems like quite a small thing. I’m sure it will be fine if you tell him.”

Filia shrugged. “I’m sorry. I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I wasn’t planning on pressing Filia for any secrets or whatever—she was free to tell me or not tell me anything. But I’d also be lying if I said I wasn’t curious. If she was willing to let me hear whatever this was, I’d happily listen. I perked up my ears and focused so I didn’t miss a word.

“I can see dice,” the fortune-teller warbled dramatically. “And also, magic...*wind* magic. I don’t know what that means, but I pray that it proves helpful. And so ends our session.”

Wait. Dice? *Wind magic*? Could that mean that, in our game of

backgammon, Filia—

“Y-y-yes, that was so very helpful,” said Filia, smiling tightly. “Thank you ever so much. All right, let’s get going.”

The minute Filia finished bowing to the fortune teller, she was already pulling me by the hand out of the tent and, from there, she speed-walked us through town.

“M-man, what in the world was *she* talking about huh?” said Filia. “Total nonsense, completely forgettable, yep. Wouldn’t you say, Yuri?”

“Hey, Filia?”

“Oh, now I suppose she was right on the mark until about halfway, but she was way off with that last part! Fortune-telling is more of an art than a science, of course! So that’s fine, and normal, and also very good.”

“Hey, Filia...”

“Wh-what is it?”

Filia suddenly stopped her rapid-fire babble. She slowly turned around, a look of fear on her face. Sweat poured down her forehead.

There was no doubt in my mind: She was completely guilty. Filia had cheated in our game of backgammon...which meant she’d gotten to plan the day.

Absolutely unforgivable. I tilted my head and cracked my knuckles. “Spill it. *All* of it.”

“Blorh!”

“Not THAT.” Jeez, obviously I wasn’t asking her to puke! “You cheated, didn’t you?”

“He. He he. He he he he...” Filia averted her gaze, all the while waterfalling sweat from her forehead.

“Nope. No way am I gonna let you just laugh this one off.”

“Well, I *guess* you could say I cheated, *or* you could say it was just a sudden impulse...” Filia lightly stuck out her tongue mischievously. “T-tee hee!”

I gave her a look. “Filiaaaaa...”

“S-soooooorry?” And lightning-fast, just as I moved, she bolted. Sheesh, she moved quick as a flash when she wanted to. Talk about

staying on your toes.

Chapter 3: Kidnapping

ONE DAY, just a normal kinda nothin' day, I was training my eyes at the inn. See, the eyes are a weak point in the human body, and I don't just ignore a weakness. Nope: I put some juices from mashed-up chili peppers in my eyes. Sure, it was a little torturous at first, but you gotta feel the burn when you're getting swole, you know? After a while, it felt the same to me as applying eye drops.

But that wasn't good, of course, because how was I gonna get *better*? I kept increasing the concentration, and at that point I was at 4,000 percent concentration. It was actually quite stimulating. Completely knocked the drowsiness out of me.

It *did*, um, hurt like crazy.

"But this pain! Will make! My eyes *stronger*! Come on, me, you can do it!" I roared in the empty room. Filia was out; it was her turn to do the grocery shopping. "Man, though, she's late..."

It was past noon, but Filia still hadn't come back. I couldn't imagine she was out eating alone or something, but who could say?

Whatever the reason, I got bored and started to roam the room looking for a thing to do. Somewhere mid-roam, I found a newspaper folded up into quarters, probably something Filia had bought. I knew she, like a lot of people, occasionally bought newspapers to find out stuff. I picked it up, thinking I'd try reading it myself. A newspaper, after all, was nothing an intellectual muscle man couldn't handle.

I scanned the articles until my eyes were drawn to one part in particular. "What's this?" I cleared my throat and read it aloud in the empty room, sneaking in some throat training for good measure. "Third case of Elf Hunting this month. The Knight Order have put up wanted posters for 'Crazy Face' Misery Mosery..."

Weird. Apparently, elves had gone missing all over the country lately. These guys only targeted elves, though there weren't many elves around here to begin with. The Knight Order had called the incidents "Elf Hunting" and were taking it seriously. As for that "Crazy Face" guy,

he was a masked man named Misery Mosery. He was the mastermind, the Knight Order said.

Yeah, it was quite a thing to read if your elven friend happened to be really, really late.

Elves being hunted. Filia not around. Maybe...?

"I mean, it's Filia. She'd be fine, obviously," I muttered.

But if she wasn't? Just in case, I decided to go look for her.

If I have a scent, I can track it. I remembered her smell, obviously, but just in case, I double-checked. Filia and I'd been sleeping in the same room, so a good long whiff of the bed and pillows would do.

Man, if Filia had seen me right then, her trust in me would plummet. At the moment, I wouldn't have minded at all if that happened. *Please, please, please, come back, Filia!*

I gave the pillows a good long sniff and thought hard about her coming back. The bed had a gentle smell. Flowery. Enough. I headed out.

Filia's scent was pretty faint, so I couldn't get distracted. I put all of my focus into tracking, following the odor through the streets of Mussen Morgeth.

"In here, huh?" I muttered.

The scent led into a mansion that stood tall in front of me. It was stone. Finely made. Mansion-y in all of the really classic ways. But what business did Filia have at a house like this? She didn't know that many people. Maybe she'd happened to bump into someone she knew when she was out grocery shopping by herself, but that seemed pretty unlikely.

I slammed the knocker against the door a couple times. Wood and iron banged together with a dull thud. The knock produced no echo.

"Hey, sorry," I called out. "Got something to ask you."

I didn't get an answer. I sharpened my senses and tried to detect a presence in the house.

Hm. I sensed...six living things. I found this increasingly suspicious. If someone was inside, why wouldn't they come on out? Maybe they were hiding something. I really wanted to break in, but...

I glanced around. A few passersby walked down the street in front

of the house. No, I probably couldn't hope to sneak into the house without them seeing.

But so what if they saw?

"What's important here is Filia!"

I busted the door to the house right down, just like that. If I was wrong about this, I'd have to apologize, maybe make a few payments—but I could afford a fine after completing all those requests, day after day.

I tracked the scent through the house. No sign of anyone on the first floor.

Snifffff. "Up on the second, huh?"

I went upstairs, and there I found it: the source of the scent.

"Hrmph? What was that noise?!" a man shouted and snarled. He narrowed his eyes. "Who are you? Why are you in my manor?!"

He resembled a dangerously heavy pig, brushed heavily with cooking oil and badly shoved into overpriced clothing. Ugh, I didn't have time to deal with this dude.

"Where's Filia?"

"Where have I seen your face?" is the question. Ah, yes. You're the champion of the magic battle tournament. You must be talking about your little elf friendo, mm? Terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I can't tell you where she is. Don't be mad, though. If you want to be mad—if you want to *hate*—point that hate in the right direction, like the fact that your little friendo happened to be an elf. Go home, champion. Otherwise, well..."

Five people jumped out from behind the smirking man. Three of them guarded him, and two leapt at me.

Bad guys, huh? Good. No need to hold back.

I instantly released my muscles, and (wham, crack) beat up the two that leapt at me, followed by (biff, crunch, oof) the remaining three. Which left expensive-suit guy. I grabbed him by the lapels and lifted him into the air.

"Otherwise what?" I asked.

"Buh?! B-buh...?!"

“Don’t make weird sounds. Give me an answer. Where’s Filia? This isn’t the tournament. If you don’t tell me, you’re going to die.”

“Buh?!”

“But before you die, I’m going to do a whole lot of things to your limbs.”

“Th-they dug a hole underground! Took her to the hideout! There, I told you! Please, don’t kill me!”

I tossed the man aside and went back to the first floor. A little searching and I found a hole in one of his rooms, filled with what seemed like a wall of solid earth. Someone must’ve gone through the hole that no longer existed, but it looked like they had sealed the way with earth magic after they passed through. More importantly, Filia’s scent stopped abruptly at the wall.

I went back upstairs to the second floor and picked up my good buddy Mr. B-Buh. He had passed out, so I took care of that right quick by plucking the fingernail from his pinky finger. Screamed pretty loud as he woke up, lemme tell you.

“Hey, man, where does that closed-off passageway go?”

“My fingernaiiil!”

“Answer.” I punched him in the stomach, but don’t worry: I took great care to make sure that I didn’t knock him out again. “Where does it go?! Answer!”

“I don’t know. They didn’t tell me anything! Really, they didn’t! It was the Verkis Bandits! The Verkis! They took the elf! I’m just a victim here! I was forced to cooperate with them because, ah, they saw I’d fudged some numbers and—other ugliness. Forced, you see, to follow orders. Terrible, just terrible!”

I punched him in the gut once more to make sure he was telling the truth, but his answer didn’t change. He just ranted on about being the victim.

The victim? Yeah, that’s a guy who calls his men on me with a grin on his face. Sure. That part aside, it sounded like he was telling the truth.

But, if he *was*, that was bad. I’d just lost Filia’s trail, and now I had no leads but the name “Verkis Bandits.” I ran from the manor, leaving the man writhing in a lot (a *lot*) of pain. My destination was the

headquarters of the knight order in Mussen Morgeth. Surely they knew something!

At the knights' headquarters, I ran up to the counter, leaned over it, and asked the receptionist what I wanted to know: "Verkis Bandits! Location! I gotta know, tell me now!"

The receptionist frowned. "I am terribly sorry, sir, but I am unable to release confidential information to an outside party. Please be on your way."

"Screw that! If you know something, tell me! They took my partner!"

"Your partner..." She shuffled a few papers absently. "I see. In that case, we'd be happy to hear your story. After confirming the credibility of your statement, the order will dispatch some units to take care of the bandits, so—"

"That's! Not! Gonna *cut it!*" I howled. Telling her my story, having them verify every word, mobilizing their troops, and finally attacking to the bandits' stronghold—how long would that even take?! No way I could take that kind of time right now. I mean, Filia could *die*. "We don't have time to just sit around and chat! We don't have a minute to lose!"

"My apologies, sir, but it's protocol."

I lost my cool. My blood boiled. Unable to bear it, I hauled up the receptionist by her collar—but she didn't show any sign of irritation. Yeah, she probably wasn't going to talk, even if I'd threatened her with force. The thought cooled me back down a little, and to be honest, I didn't feel great.

"Please," I said, letting go and standing back, "please tell me. If I know where they are, I can take 'em down. Just...please!"

The receptionist seemed to think I was calm enough to talk now. "Against the Verkis Bandits, a person of ordinary skill would undoubtedly be outmatched and defeated. A skilled adventurer, on the other hand, could ensure there wouldn't be any collateral damage. If you are Rank A or higher, I can provide you with the information. Do

you fall into that category?”

“I’m Rank...C.”

If we were talking skill alone, I knew I could match any A-Rank adventurer, but no way could I convince her just by claiming that.

“Then I’m very sorry, but I cannot divulge this information. Please leave it to the professionals; we will get your partner out of there as soon as possible,” said the receptionist, looking straight at me.

I started thinking, and fast. Would it be better for me to take the time to talk this through with the receptionist, or would I be wasting my time? Or would I waste more time running out to search alone when I didn’t know where to go? What should I do?!

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t Sir Yuri! Been a while, eh?”

That voice—Gauche Moratrim, the knight we’d met in Astarte after I took out the Grim Reaper. Not stopping to wonder what could have brought him to Mussen Morgeth, I ran up to him and pressed him for an answer. He knew how capable I was, so surely he’d clue me in!

“Gauche! I need to know about the Verkis Bandits! They kidnapped Filia! What’s the skinny?”

“What’s a sk—wait, they took Lady Filia?! Understood. I’ll bring you to them myself, immediately!”

“Deputy Commander Gauche?! But when you consider the danger that the Verkis Bandits pose, releasing that information to a C-Rank adventurer is base foolishne—”

Gauche raised his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll take responsibility. As deputy commander of our order, I assure you this man is more than qualified. But enough talk—let’s have at them, Yuri! You can fill me in on our way to their hideout!”

Gauche exited the station, and I ran right after him.

Filia had to be safe, she just *had* to...

An hour later, Gauche skillfully maneuvered his earth dragon through the fields, and I ran along beside him on foot. We’d arrived at a

mountain overgrown with trees. Gauche dismounted from his earth dragon and examined the ground, which transitioned into a steeper and steeper incline.

“Thank you,” he said, with a nod at his dragon. “That’s enough for now. Wait here for me.”

His earth dragon responded with a screech and fwumped comfortably to the ground, cuddling a nearby tree.

“You know,” said Gauche, turning to me, “I’m genuinely surprised. I can’t believe you really *can* match the speed of an earth dragon.”

“Don’t worry about me right now. We gotta find the hideout. That’s what matters.”

“Yes, you’re certainly right. The hideout is a little ahead. We go on foot from here.”

The minutes passed in silence as Gauche led the way, keeping even his breathing quiet, and I followed on his heel. Soon, he pointed to our left at what like a made-man cavern of some kind. A single guard stood watch.

“The Verkis Bandits consist of roughly twenty people,” whispered Gauche. “Some are stronger, some weaker, but their leader is unquestionably powerful. If you wanted to put it in terms of adventurer ranks, I would rate him at least Rank A. The odd thing is, ah, there aren’t many people standing watch. Maybe something has happened?”

“Can I go to the punching now? Is that all right?” I hissed. I just couldn’t sit still after hearing something like that. Even the guard standing watch seemed to be fidgety.

“We cannot allow impatience to take control. Come on, Yuri—follow me.”

Gauche sprouted black hands that looked like shadows from his back, one after another, and with them reached out toward the watchman by the cavern. Then the countless black hands were on the man, and he was unconscious on the ground before he could even scream. Were those shadowy hands Gauche’s ability?

“All right,” he said, taking a step closer to the cavern. “Let’s go.”

Yeah, of course—but before entering the cavern, I tried to sense what was inside, just to be safe.

“Wha—?!” I couldn’t hide my surprise. “Hey, Gauche? There’s only one person inside.”

“Are you sure, Yuri?”

Gauche seemed surprised to hear that.

“Just wait a minute.” I sharpened my sense of smell, reading the air with my mighty nose, and yeah, that was definitely Filia’s scent just up ahead.

But my nose picked up another smell. An overpowering scent. The rank smell of...

“Death! I can smell lots of death up ahead! Hurry!” I shouted. “Something might’ve happened to Filia!”

“The scent of death?! Understood! Let’s go!”

We hurried into the cave. The path forked several times inside, but we zeroed in on the path down which I sensed signs of life.

Piles and piles of mutilated bodies scattered the floor of the cavern. In the center of it all stood Filia herself, surrounded by the whirling power of her summoning spell, Wind God.



I ran to her. “Filia! Are you okay?!”

“Is that...Yuri...?” she said hoarsely.

She collapsed.

I scooped her up in my arms. Her body was unsettlingly light, as always, but her lungs took in breath and her heart definitely still beat.

“Thank goodness...” I let out a gut-deep sigh of relief.

She wasn’t hurt.

“This is incredible.” Gauche stared down at one of the dead bandits—or one of the bandits from the neck down, at least, because the head could’ve been lying just about anywhere in all the piles. “To think she completely annihilated the Verkis Bandits all by herself...”

From the looks of it, Filia had overwhelmed the boss and his underlings all at once.

“Let’s hurry on back for now,” Gauche advised. “We must let Lady Filia rest in a safe place.”

I didn’t have any particular objection to that. With Gauche once more in the lead, we returned to Mussen Morgeth, and I carried Filia in my arms the whole way back.

Chapter 4: An Explanation of the Situation

I LEFT FILIA IN THE CARE of a healer and waited for her to regain consciousness in a small room of the order's headquarters. All I could do was sit on the couch and think back on what had happened.

"Hopeless," I mumbled. "Completely hopeless."

No matter how I rationalized it, I had been in a real panic. Never mind what happened at that oily dog's mansion—ranting and raving at the knight order's headquarters had been completely meaningless. I'd had absolute tunnel vision and acted like a complete brute, lashing out and even threatening people.

Filia had been kidnapped, and I'd done nothing to stop it. I had to get stronger. I'd lived on my own my whole life, but now I had a partner, and that meant when she was in danger, her safety was my responsibility. She'd survived, but what if something awful had happened? I could barely even sit still.

"Ah." In the middle of all my self-disgust, I felt a presence coming my way. The door opened, and there stood Filia.

"Thank you for being worried about me," she said. "For coming to save me."

"Filia! So...so you're feeling all right now?"

"Sluggish, and a bit dazed, what with all the magic I used, and the spot of fainting, but, yes. I'm okay. I'm going to head over and explain things to Gauche, but it's kind of a hassle to tell the same story twice, so I thought I'd have you come along with me, Yuri."

Here she was, worrying about *hassles*... Yeah, she talked a big game, pretending everything was okay. I could understand that. I mean, she'd just been abducted by a bunch of strangers, so I'm sure she wanted someone, anyone, close by. A knight escorted me and Filia to Gauche.

"Ah, Lady Filia," said Gauche with a sigh. "What an awful thing you've gone through."

“But you came to save me. It’s fine.”

“It’s my job, after all.” Gauche gave her a gentle smile. I wished I could put people at ease like he could. “At any rate, I understand it’s a trying thing for a victim to revisit their experiences, and it pains me to ask, but I’m afraid we must. Would you tell me what happened?”

“Y-yes. Yes, I suppose so,” said Filia nervously. “I was out in town shopping. Suddenly, I felt this sharp blow to my neck, and I was knocked out. I bet it was lightning magic, now that I think about it. I couldn’t react in time. Casting a spell like that in the city... I never would’ve thought someone would...”

Gauche shook his head. “It’s speculated that one of the Verkis accomplices has an ability that makes their magic difficult to detect. That’s likely why no one noticed.”

“When I woke up, I was in that cave. They injected me with something and said I wouldn’t be able to use magic anymore. I don’t know what the substance was, but we elves know our forest herbs, medicinal *and* poisonous... We’ve developed antibodies against many of the latter. I tried to use a small-scale spell as a test. It worked fine. From there, I looked for an opening, and...”—she swallowed—“...well, just as they were about to put some kind of brainwashing magic tool on me, I used wind magic on the man they were all looking to. Their leader, I think. Cut his head clean off.”

Killing the leader first always slowed henchmen way down. Filia had remained calm and calculating, even after getting kidnapped. Totally different from me.

“With all the bandits panicking, I managed to take them all out just in the nick of time. Somehow. And just before the last of my magical energy ran out, you two came to my rescue.” With her explanation finished, Filia took a sip of the drink Gauche had offered her. A long sip.

“Thank you, Filia. We’ve been keeping an eye on the Verkis Bandits, and we were preparing a raid on their hideout. I came to Mussen Morgeth expressly for that purpose. Still, I’m amazed you annihilated an entire group of such fearsome bandits all by yourself.”

“Oh no, it’s not like I really did much. I was lost in a trance, mostly. I honestly don’t remember much of anything, but...” Filia hugged herself tightly with her thin arms. “I shudder to think what

would've happened if I hadn't endured that special training with Yuri before the tournament."

True enough. Anybody would be scared, suffering something like she just had.

"Now, ah," said Filia, "are we all finished with this interview?"

"Just one more thing, please," said Gauche. "Did you happen to hear any of them say the words 'Crazy Face' or 'Misery Mosery'?"

I gasped. Couldn't help it. I'd just read that name in the newspaper hours before! The supposed mastermind behind the Elf Hunting incidents, "Crazy Face" Misery Mosery. "You're tellin' me Filia's kidnapping was part of this whole Elf Hunting thing?"

"Filia is an elf, so we can't dismiss the possibility. We confirmed that those under Misery Mosery's command prioritize capturing elves over all other activities," Gauche replied grimly.

It, well, *did* make sense.

I turned to Filia, who held up her small hand. "Actually, good Gauche, I do recall coming across that name when I read someone's mind back there."

"In that case, we should assume this incident was related. Hm. Thank you very much, Filia. Your cooperation is sincerely appreciated. We'll take it from here."

And with that, our interview was over. Gauche stood and went for the door. Paused. "By the way," he added. "Until this Elf Hunting business is settled, it would be best for you to avoid walking out alone too much. Misery Mosery is one of the 'Sinmarch,' after all."

"I suppose it'd be best if we kept together for a while," I told Filia back at the inn.

There was what Gauche said to us earlier, which I agreed with, but there were other things he hadn't said. That was what bothered me. What Gauche told us about just before he left, this thing about Sinmarch... I was sure I'd heard something about them, this group of internationally wanted villains. I didn't really feel comfortable letting

Filia walk around alone with guys like that lurking around.

Filia's expression darkened, however. "I'm sorry, Yuri. I got you involved in this, all because I'm an elf, and I mean, if I knew I was going to cause you this much trouble, I..." Filia hung her head. "I wish I'd never followed you, Yuri."

Her eyes were shrouded by her long silver hair. It was heart-wrenching to see her this way—biting her lip, clenching her trembling fists. She seemed so overwhelmed. At a time like this, the only thing I could do for Filia, as her partner, was talk to her.

"Um," I said, and shuffled my hands. "Filia. Up until now, I've lived my whole life just doing whatever I wanted. That's all. And I was totally free to do it."

Sure, the training was tough at times, but I'd chosen it. It was *my* toughness to suffer, all to become stronger. Man, when all was said and done, I must've set new records for selfishness living my life as I did.

"And I acted the same way this time around too. I wanted to save you, Filia, so I saved you. Because I'm selfish, and that's all there is to it."

I said it all as I thought through it, my words gradually taking shape and coming together. I patted Filia's head and turned her toward me. "When I worried you might be gone, I couldn't even think about anything else, so please. Please don't say that you shouldn't have followed me. Meeting you was the reason I decided I wanted to leave the woods in the first place, Filia. I need you."

At that, she looked up at me. "R-really?"

"Yeah. Really."

"Okay, but... I-I'm going to peek into your mind, you know? If you're lying, I'm *going* to find out, you know?" She squinted at me, as if trying to see something hidden.

"Fine by me. I meant what I said, after all. Besides, you usually peek into my mind without my permission anyway, don't you?" I said with a skeptical look.

"Eh he he, yeah. Guilty." Filia stuck out her tongue, but her playful expression vanished in a flash and she bowed her head. "But, Yuri...thank you."

"I dunno why you're being grateful to me. I was just saying it was

the natural thing for me to do. Selfish and all.”

“Even so, thank you.”

“A-all right.”

She had a little bit of her spirit back, it looked like, or I sure hoped so. As I was thought it over, Filia plunked down on the bed and beckoned me to come over. I obeyed and sat beside her.

“You’re an odd one, Yuri. Our personal values are totally different, and we don’t often see eye to eye, but you know what you are? You’re *kind*, Yuri.”

“Kind...” I repeated. What a weird compliment. “That’s the first time someone’s called me that.”

The unexpectedly stern look on Filia’s face made me more than a little nervous. “This whole thing just showed for sure that I’m weak, Yuri. And if I’m this weak, I can’t even think about accompanying you, especially since...” She took a deep breath. “...I’m an elf. I don’t know who will be coming after me.”

“I...suppose so.”

“So you see, Yuri... I think I’ll go back to the forest where I was born and raised. Will you accompany me?”

Wha—okay, I hadn’t seen that coming. Me? Why? *What?*

“Can you tell me why?” I asked.

“I think I told you before that my ability is Telepathy, right? Well...that was a lie.”

“A lie?”

But Filia had read my mind tons of times. That didn’t make sense.

“It’s actually an ability called Clairvoyance. It basically means being able to read the thoughts of living things in the surrounding area, regardless of their consent. It allows me to freely read the true essence and abilities of people. Then again, I can’t really use it now though, so it was only *sort* of a lie.”

Uhh. Uhh? Hmm. There was just so much I couldn’t wrap my head around these days. Did I not train my brain enough? Was it time for more rock-headbutting? I gave my head a tiny, uncertain touch. “Sorry. I don’t get this at all. Can you break it down from the beginning?”

Filia nodded. "I understand. Is it all right if I start at the beginning?"

"Mhm."

"All right. A long time ago, I think I told you that I was avoided by my peers in the village, Yuri, because of my Telepathy...that is, my Clairvoyance. But that wasn't the real problem, I think. It was because of my Wind God. I have two abilities," said Filia, chuckling to herself. "I'm a dual ability holder—a dual, as we're sometimes called."

I caught a tinge of loneliness in her expression. Huh. So the Wind God "magic" she'd used at the tournament and against the bandits was basically her Wind God "ability"? Actually, if she had dual abilities, didn't that mean she was super cool or something? Or was she just so strong it made people jealous? I supposed that could make a certain kind of dingus ostracize a person.

"It all started when my abilities suddenly manifested one day. You're probably not aware of this, Yuri, but most elves worship our 'Almighty Wind God.' We believe this deity controls all nature, with a specialty in, well, wind. The village chief thought my having the 'Wind God' ability was akin to spitting on the image of the Almighty Wind God. Just for that, he named me a heretic. From that point, the village began to discriminate against me in various ways."

Man, my earlier thoughts had been way off. But it wasn't like people could choose their own abilities or anything. Anybody with half a brain knew that, right?

"I sure was...surprised, we'll say. I couldn't have possibly imagined my mother and father, who had been so kind to me all my life—that everyone else in the village, in fact—would treat me like I didn't even exist. Do you know, before—and I worry this left me a bit spoiled—they always told me I was such a precious thing? I wonder sometimes if they were only so kind because they found me particularly nice to look at. You can imagine my shock when that no longer seemed to matter to them."

Filia chuckled darkly. "It all changed so abruptly, and there I was asking, 'Why? Oh, why would you do this?' Ah, too bad for Filia. Their faces would scrunch up into a scowl, and they'd tell me they didn't want to hear a word from my filthy mouth. It became easy at that point to just think that, ah...to think I shouldn't have even been born."

Up until that point, Filia told the story like it had all happened to someone else. Then the tears poured down her cheeks so suddenly that she herself seemed surprised. She wiped them away with her sleeve, a quick scrubbing motion. Her eyes were still red.

“And then, what was it, a year or so after? Time grows strange when you’re depressed. Anyway, around then, an unusually large monster appeared in the forest. All the elves in the forest worked together to face it, and still they weren’t enough. Just when the village was about to be smashed to pieces, an S-Rank adventurer happened to be pass through. I watched the adventurer kill the monster with a single blow. I admired them so much. *I* wanted to be like that. Children really are simple, aren’t they?” Filia added with a choked smile, as if she didn’t want the conversation to get too heavy.

I really needed to thank that adventurer. If it wasn’t for them, I might not have met Filia.

“I tried to leave home in secret, but the village chief found me. I sure got a good scolding, and they’d apparently found some kind of magitool in the corpse of that freakishly large monster. A box. That magitool sucked out my ‘Wind God.’ It degraded my Clairvoyance into what it is now—that parlor trick I call Telepathy. Pretty awful, huh, don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

“Not that like that could faze *me*, the transcendently beautiful elf.”

“Filia. Come on.” Whether or not you were fazed by something had nothing to do with looks.

“Eh he he. Well, anyway, I thought I’d look for another chance to escape.”

Her will hadn’t been crushed after all that, huh? Filia had a real strong heart.

“But, well, after the Wind God was sealed, it was like...” She frowned. “How do I put this? Everyone’s attitudes toward me changed again. They went back to how they were before the Wind God manifested, you see. Or so I thought. I couldn’t hear them, with my mere Telepathy. They didn’t want me to hear what they really thought.”

Filia suddenly began to tremble. “It came to a head when a

neighbor, one who hadn't spoken to me in ages, suddenly said—out of the blue, you see, and I remember the words exactly—she said, 'Oh my, Filia, you're as cute as ever, aren't you?' Simply because I'd atoned for my sins, they believed, as they'd extracted that Wind God from me. Like it had all been nothing. Like none of it had ever happened. It frightened me."

Yeah. I bet.

"So, I ran away. Since I couldn't use the Wind God, my wind magic had weakened, and it was quite difficult. Then again, the village chief didn't think I'd try to pass through the forest without the Wind God. Wind magic was always my strongest element, and some pretty strong monsters roam our forest, but without the Wind God..." She trailed off.

"And so you went into the forest all excited, but then you got lost, huh?"

"Yep!" Filia snapped her fingers. "Freedom's a lovely idea, but I wasn't used to having to make those sorts of decisions by myself. Before I knew it, I wound up lost in a certain part of the forest I hadn't ever been in before." Filia giggled and clapped her cheek. Sly.

"You're gonna talk about getting lost and almost dying with a 'Yep!' like that, huh? C'mon, ya idiot." How could she possibly keep calling me a muscle-brained idiot all the time? She wasn't any different from me in terms of just going off and doing reckless stuff.

"Wow. Yuri's calling *me* an idiot," said Filia, hanging her head. "That's one for the history books."

Maybe it was because she'd gotten all those thoughts off her chest, but the atmosphere seemed more normal again, thank goodness. I'm not good at cheering people up, ya know?

"That's why you wanna go back to the forest, then? To regain those two abilities?"

"Exactly. If I have my Clairvoyance and the proper version of the Wind God, nothing remotely like today could ever happen again. And if it *did*, I'd end it a lot sooner and be back for lunch."

Hmm, yeah. It probably would be better to have those abilities for self-defense. "If that's what you wanna do, Filia, I've got no objections. After we've prepared, do you wanna start heading out to your forest

village right away?”

“Ah, well, there’s just one concern.”

Concern? “What?”

“I don’t precisely, exactly, quite, really know where it is in any way whatsoever. I’d never gone out of the woods before, and after I finally *did* make it out, well, I got so happy and so excited that studying at my surroundings was the last thing on my mind.”

“Okay, to be totally clear, you have no idea how to get there?”

“Afraid so.”

“Then what are we going to do?”

“Hmm...” Filia put a finger to her lips. “We’ll go for it. Muddle on through. Gumption! Determination!”

“Ugh, don’t say ridiculous stuff.” Intellectual muscle man though I was, there wasn’t anything I could really do. The elf village was in...a forest! That was our single clue.

“For the time being,” Filia said, “I’d like to take a focused approach to exploring so we can get an idea of where we’re headed.” It certainly seemed like there was no other option but just that: going through the forest with a fine-tooth comb—which depended on finding the right forest in the first place.

“All right, then, let’s do it,” I answered.

With the plan decided, Filia wriggled herself into bed, and I propped myself up on the floor on one elbow for training. This was our typical daily routine, but no matter how much time passed, I still couldn’t hear her breathing in the way she normally did when she was asleep. When I briefly glanced at her, I saw the mattress on the bed was trembling.

Oh, of course she was shaking. What else had I expected? She’d been kidnapped, thrown into a situation where anything could happen, and now, come on, who wouldn’t be scared? I quit my balancing training exercises, got off my elbow, and went over to Filia.

“I’m sorry, Yuri,” she said. “I can’t sleep, I’m scared...”

I took hold of Filia’s trembling hands. She shuddered for a moment, but eventually her body relaxed. Her hands were pillow-soft and pure snow-white, and there, suddenly, I thought to myself: Filia

was like any regular girl. She could just use magic was all. Man, I'd been so thoughtless for not noticing.

"Are you sure you're okay having me at your side," she said, "even if people like that come after me again?"

"Of course I am. Don't worry, Filia. You can stay with me. I'll take care of you. With me around, doesn't matter if it's a brokirin or a group of bandits or anybody at all. They'll be down in one blow."

"Thank you...so much." Maybe she was still overwhelmed, because Filia started crying again. She stuck her head under the covers so I wouldn't see.

"Well, um, if there's a time you do feel anxious, you can...just take a look at my muscles, ya know? Get a load of these well-developed pectorals and biceps. Looking at 'em will ease your anxiety for sure. Wanna touch 'em?" I asked the lump under the covers.

"No...that's okay. Really. It's really okay."

Hard pass, huh? Oof. Well, I thought it'd help—I mean, just seeing that muscles like this could exist in the world is a balm for the soul, dontcha think?

Or maybe she was just trying to put on a brave face and not bother me? Better to check.

"I'm just gonna ask ya one more time. You really, absolutely, *for sure* for sure that you don't wanna touch 'em? You're not gonna regret it?"

"I can tell you with absolute certainty that I will most definitely not in any way regret it whatsoever. I *will* accept your sentiment, however."

Um. I felt like I'd somehow ended up doing the opposite of cheering her up. Ugh, I was so out of my depth. Sorry, Filia.

In the end, Filia finally fell asleep a few minutes later. It was kinda hard for me to confirm if she was down for the count or not. Then Filia, who I thought must be sleeping, squeezed my hand tight.

I ended up staying with her through the night.

Chapter 5: Departure

THE NEXT DAY, Filia and I were thinking of heading for the guild to ask around about her home forest, but I needed to go somewhere else first. I wanted to see the receptionist at the headquarters of Mussen Morgeth's knight order. Sure, I'd been in a panic after Filia was kidnapped, but that didn't make up for my behavior. I just had to go there and express how sorry I was with a proper apology, complete with a gift.

"Sorry, Filia. For having you come along with me for this." I'd explained the whole situation to Filia and asked her to come with me. As long as this Misery Mosery guy (or whatever he was called) was out causing trouble, it was a bad idea to leave her alone.

"If I hadn't been kidnapped, that never would have happened," said Filia. "I'm part of this as much as you are." She looked more adult than usual. Was she dressed so nicely today because we were going to apologize?

Filia wore a black dress that contrasted with her pale skin, a dress she'd bought earlier for formal situations. She had this air of almost aristocratic elegance. Oh, and I was wearing a suit. Man, was it tight around the chest. Felt like my pecs were gonna bust right through.

"All right, Filia, I got the apology gift. How about we get going?"

"Um...Yuri? That's a dumbbell," said Filia.

"Oh, I'm aware, but thank you."

"What I'm saying is that, err, I think that's kind of inappropriate as an apology gift?"

Inappropriate? But it was such a great way to train your muscles. After much discussion, though, I decided to go with one out of the several other items Filia suggested.

We arrived at the station with the apology gift, but the woman standing at the reception desk was different from the one I'd met before. I explained to her my intent, and she led me into a break room, where

we found the receptionist from the other day.

“I’m really very sorry,” I said, and I bowed toward her. Filia bowed too, just after me. I felt sorry that Filia even had to. It wasn’t her fault! I’d caused so much trouble for so many people.

“Please, it’s all right.” The receptionist smiled. I raised my head back up. “The situation was dire, so it wasn’t difficult to understand why you acted like that. Really, I’m just glad she’s safe.”

She just forgave me after all my ranting and raving? What a tolerant person.

Filia nodded. “Thank you so very much. Hey, Yuri! *You* need to thank her properly, too!”

“Um. Th-thank you, err, ever-so-uh, much.” I wasn’t used to speaking so formally.

Back at the inn, Filia rolled her eyes and smiled at me. “You really can’t speak formally, huh, Yuri? That is so perfectly predictable that it circles the globe and goes right back to being unbelievable.”

“But I hate dealing with that level of formality, ya know? If I had the time to learn all of that stuff, I’d rather use it for training instead.”

“Yes, yes, muscle, muscle,” said Filia with a wink. “But you know, there may be more times in the future where you’re going to need formality. Like if you need to go around and get information by talking to people.”

I see. She certainly had a point there. Probably Filia was a big part of why I’d gotten by thus far without incident. She kind of acted like a social buffer.

“My dear Yuri, you *should* be more grateful to me,” said Filia, letting out a little laugh and puffing out her chest proudly. Seemed like she had read my mind again.

“Thank you, Filia.” I replied, and I meant it. Without her, I could’ve gone on living like I always had. But with her, I’d been able to find a new, exciting life, so different from the one I had before. In that sense, I was always gonna be grateful to her.

“But, um...please don’t look straight at me like that. Rather embarrassing,” Filia said, looking away, “so please quit it.” Her cheeks were turning red.

Wait, she was telling me to be grateful, but now she got all embarrassed when I actually thanked her? What was *that* supposed to mean?

“Anyway, I’ll teach you how to speak formally, so please do not worry.”

“All right, thanks. Looking forward to it!”

Starting that day, I made time in the evenings to study with Filia. It wasn’t that I especially hated studying or anything. If a thing had clear use value, I thought it important to buckle down and learn. But for some reason, I found this way more fun than when I’d studied before. In the end, I couldn’t figure the reason why.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

We stood in front of Mussen Morgeth’s gates in the morning, birdsong filling the air. In the days following our apology at the headquarters of the knight order, we’d gathered information to try to find the forest where Filia had lived. According to that intel, there were three forests that could contain an elf village.

One of those forests was well-traveled by all kinds of people, so that one was out. The remaining two were called Boon Forest and Hihi Forest, respectively. However, since Hihi Forest was only accessible to adventurers of Rank A or higher, we decided to set our sights on Boon Forest first.

“It’s been a long time since we traveled,” said Filia, looking up at me.

“Yeah. It’ll probably be past noon by the time we reach Boon Forest. I haven’t been moving my body much at all lately, I’m itching to go.”

“Um...Yuri, when you accepted that C-Rank request a couple days ago, you started running around the city at full speed and got reported, didn’t you?”

“Moving, shmoving. *That* wasn’t moving at all.” I wasn’t even

running at full speed. If I really gave it my all, passersby would've been blown away by sheer air pressure. That had been jogging at best.

"Is it okay if I leave any monsters we encounter along the way to you, Yuri? I want to sort out my feelings before I reunite with everyone."

From what we'd heard back in the guild, there weren't any particularly strong monsters in Boon Forest. In fact, few monsters lived there at all, and since none of them were profitable bounties, adventurers didn't care to explore the place either. In other words, the monsters would be small fry—no trouble. Also, having heard Filia's story, I worried going back to the village might be a little traumatic for her, so I readily accepted this suggestion, and with that, the two of us set off for Boon.

It didn't take long—we arrived at the forest without incident just past noon. I studied a tree growing on the outermost edge of the forest from the other side of a meadow. It looked to be about thirty feet tall. Light brown in color. Welp, just a normal tree...*or was it?*

"How 'bout it, Filia? This look like the same kinda tree from the place you lived?"

Filia shook her head. "Unfortunately, no. The trees from where I lived looked...well, they *felt* 'lively' I suppose."

"Huh? Whaddya mean, lively?" I peered at her. "You feeling okay? No fever?"

"Lively" just wasn't an adjective I'd use to describe a tree.

"Anyway, this isn't a tree from my home." She sniffed. "And I'm just fine, thank you very much."

"If you say so. We don't really know much 'bout what the forest is like inside, though, so let's keep moving."

Filia agreed, and we marched on into the trees. Normally, you should be way careful about poisons and stuff when going into the forest—toxic bugs and plants and the like—but Filia and I weren't normal, so we proceeded with our search pretty easily. I've developed antibodies for almost all poisons thanks to my daily regimen. Filia had some too, plus recovery magic. Between all that, we were ready to search almost without slowing our pace at all.

Monsters did periodically attack us, but none of them were that

formidable. Just more busywork. Around when the sun started to set and dusk wasn't far, we encountered some kind of wild boar-looking monster that rushed us, like some kind of last-ditch effort from the forest monsters as a whole. It wasn't too big of a threat after I socked a hole clean through it with my Pistol Punch.

That was probably the end of it. I made sure there weren't any other signs of life around, then called over to Filia. "Think it's about time we get ready to get some sleep, eh?"

"Sounds good."

Well, we hadn't imagined we'd finish exploring an entire forest in just one day, so we weren't too bothered about needing to find a place to sleep. I bent over and slammed my fist against the deciduous soil we'd been walking on. "Hooah!"

That smack was pretty loud, enough to startle Filia, but I was whacking the ground *for* Filia. Loud thumping—WHAM! WHAM!—resounded through the forest for a while, until finally, I finished.

"There we go."

Ground that had been flat was now a gigantic hole, big enough for a person to climb right in. The surface inside the hole was smooth, almost like it'd been sanded down and varnished. If I'd gone too hard, it could've ended up smooth as mirror glass.

This was Filia's bed. After all, Filia couldn't sleep while standing like me. It wasn't like we had any other options either. I'd made holes like this before too, back when we were escaping the forest I'd grown up in, but this time I made it extra, *extra* smooth so my nervous comrade might finally relax a little—just as any gentle muscle man would do.

"Thank you very much, Yuri." With that, Filia lay down in the hole. Lightly rolled around. Rolled and rolled and rolled...

"How is it? Comfy?"

"You made it for me. I don't have any complaints."

"Kay."

But seeing Filia lie down, it was kinda like... It, uh, kinda looked like a coffin or something, with a dead body inside of it?

Not that it mattered or anything what it looked like, and I

definitely didn't care about *that*.

"Oh, I do have one complaint," said Filia.

"What's that?"

"I can't get out." Filia was trying, too, wriggling her limbs to pull herself up like a newborn fawn or something. Oops. I'd gone for smooth and completely hit the target: It was downright slippery.

"Sorry. I'll fix it."

"But...but you're not laughing at me, are you...?"

"Nah."

"ReallyyyOOFHP!" Filia fell back down with a thunk.

"I'm not laughing. I'm really sorry. It's like, I can't even bear to watch it. It's an awful sight."

"An awful—all right, Yuri, I don't know about *that* wording."

I felt pretty sorry for her like this, so I made the inside of the hole a little more rugged to give her an easier time climbing out. It had been hard work making it so smooth, but sometimes you just gotta make a hole in a forest less comfortable to help your tiny friend climb out when she's gotta.

With an enthusiastic, "Thank you!" Filia lay back down to go to sleep, and all without a single slip or slide.

"Ffff...pshew!" Yep, that was the sleeping Filia sound. "Ffff...pshew!"

For myself, I kept a wary eye on our surroundings till morning.

At dawn, we got ready to keep moving and resume our search. Based on the estimated size of the area, we could probably get a good sense of it within a couple days.

"Are you really sure you don't need to sleep?" asked Filia. Even though I'd told her I was fine, she was a real worrier.

"Nah, I don't really have any problems going without sleep for a day or so. Fifteen days, though, now that I don't know about."

"I see. Well, I'm always glad to hear new ways you've stopped being human," said Filia.

Filia wasn't shocked by my body's performance, huh? Maybe she was getting used to it. I guess that could be a good thing sometimes? Anyway, nothing happened on the second day of our search. We encountered only two monsters, and I just kept hoping we would find something on the third. I wanted to restore Filia's abilities as soon as possible.

But in the end, we were almost done and I didn't think it likely we'd find anything in Boon.

"Ah, man," I groaned. "We didn't even pick up any clues."

"Huh. Look at you, Yuri, getting all dejected—how unlike you. Think of it this way: Now it's almost guaranteed that Hihi Forest is the right one, isn't it? Look at it that way, and you can see we've made a ton of progress!" Filia gave an enthusiastic fist pump, and her smile was just so big and kind-hearted.

A positive outlook, huh? Yeah, she certainly had a point there. But what was up with her arms? I mean, little as they were, they were so jiggly! Even without me flexing, my muscles always announced themselves, yeah? She hadn't done enough training.

Yeah, that's what we needed—I had to show this here forest some *muscles*! I released those sweet muscles of mine and struck a passionate pose, showing off my bulging chest to the forest.

Filia blinked. "Why are you making that pose?"

"I'm showing the forest my muscles," I said, muscularly.

"I-I see...?" replied Filia, which didn't sound especially convinced.

"Anywho, Filia, we gotta get stronger!"

"We have to be at least Rank A for that other forest, right?" Filia's shoulders slumped, deflated. "I hate training. It's always so hard..."

"Okay. No monsters around. How about we run all the way back to town?"

"Did you just say 'run all the way'?!"

No more talk! I took off, dragging her along with me. We rushed back to the city—mostly. After running about 80 percent of the way, Filia started wheezing, so we went back to walking. Jeez, we only ran

for a measly two hours! Filia really had to work on her stamina.

“Doesn’t the city seem louder, somehow?” asked Filia as Mussen Morgeth came into view. Filia had great hearing, on par with mine. I listened carefully, and indeed, I heard a strange sound.

“Whoa. Sounds like there’s a pretty big battle going on up there. Let’s hurry, yeah?”

“Mmhm! Understood!”

We rushed back to the city, and to the gruesome sights that waited us there.

Chapter 6: Majin Invasion

WHEN WE ARRIVED, we were greeted with a nightmarish sight.

A battle had broken out between monsters and people near the gates, and there were way more monsters than people.

The knights and a ton of adventurers were totally overrun. Many injured people lay on the ground, with fewer than twenty still standing to fight.

“Over thirty monsters...” Filia marveled. “That’s quite a lot.”

“But we’ll help.”

I soared through the air with Filia on my back, passing over the monsters and landing in front of the gate. The bodies of the people who’d been knocked out during the fight littered the ground around us. Even the humans still on their feet showed clear signs of fatigue.

“Man, we’re kinda outnumbered here, huh?” I took a deep breath and fired my Pistol Punch at an encroaching monster. “HOOAH!”

The monster was blown back, but it took only a sec for it to get back up. They could withstand my Pistol Punch, huh?

“Heh. You’re tougher than I thought.”

“These monsters, Yuri—many of them are at *least* Rank B. Even one of them would be a threat.”

Well, if a few dozen B-Rank monsters had come crashing into the city, it was no wonder things had turned out like this.

“I’ll treat the injured, Yuri,” said Filia. “You go on ahead, and *be careful.*”

“You know it, Filia.”

“Do I?” Filia mumbled, but she still dashed off to take a nearby knight to a healer waving at her from the gate. Recovery magic was rare and valuable, and it made sense to prioritize putting Filia in the rear to heal people up. Once she safely retreated, I advanced to the front lines to join the fray.

“Sir Yuri! Glad you’re here.”

“Gauche? How’s it going?”

Gauche shook his blood-soaked head from side to side. “Ah, it’s been quite intense. We’ve pushed through about six A-Rank monsters, and now we’re nigh spent.”

“They’ve even got A-Rank monsters here?” I hadn’t fought any A-Ranks yet, but if they were stronger than that brokirin (big, green, and B-Rank), then I’d love to throw down against ’em.

“We’re dealing with two right now. Over there.”

Gauche pointed toward some kinda lupine monster with blue fur. The thing stood about three feet tall and six feet long.

“It worried me how active the monsters seemed lately, and now this. It’s a nightmare. And here I’d dared to take holiday for a whole month, and...” Gauche sounded utterly drained. “Some of my men have died, Yuri. These monsters took good knights from me, and I will never forgive it.”

No wonder he was drained—although he was technically number two in his knight order, in reality, Gauche was effectively in charge of knights all over the county.

“Gauche, you can’t push yourself any harder!” a nearby knight cried out. “You took down four of those guurdecks almost single-handedly. Your magic energy’s almost completely exhausted!”

Gauche had beaten four of those A-Rank monsters by himself? Whoa—that was downright amazing. And he’d had to fight off other monsters the whole while. Of course he was exhausted.

But Gauche didn’t back down. “I’m all right. My magical energy’s running low, but I can still move like any adventurer, like any knight... and I *am* a knight. Knights do not give in to exhaustion. The purpose of our order is to protect the peace of this world, so that people might live happily and smile. For that end, my life would be a small price to pay.”

Giving up your life for the sake of humanity? Wild. Maybe being so strong did weird things to your brain.

“But if you’re gone, who will lead us?!” the knight demanded.

“As things stand, I’m the only one who can fight these guurdecks. My retreat would mark the retreat of the entire front. It would be our defeat. I’m afraid, then, that I can’t. I cannot give the people of this city—of this country—reason to fear—”

Great, okay, cool beans, but this was getting wordy and I had stuff on my mind.

“Hey, Gauche. It cool if we take ’em all down?”

Thing was, Gauche was basically a friend to me, and I still had plenty to make up to him for causing him all that trouble. And, I mean, what if he died while I stood around twiddling my totally ripped thumbs? I’d have trouble sleeping at night.

“But, Yuri, you’re, ah, Rank C, aren’t you? It’s far too dangerous.”

Aw, come on. Gauche knew I’d killed the Grim Reaper. He should’ve realized I could handle it. Then again, I suppose Gauche thought of me as one of the people he was supposed to protect, huh? Jeez, that’s like an *excessive* amount of hero. Well, wasn’t like I disliked people like that or anything.

“Sorry,” I said, “but I just can’t hold back my excitement anymore. Leave these guys here to me.”

Without waiting for Gauche’s answer, I ran in and rammed my fist into a monster that was trying to chomp a knight.

“I’ll take it from here, so can ya get going already?” I shouted over my shoulder.

Once Gauche got enough people out of the way, I let out one of my favorite war cries. The monsters all turned toward me.

“Whew, you sure look amped, huh? Guess you’re just like me.”

Before I could even get out another good bellow, two guurdecks charged up all threatening and stuff. Fair, I guess. I mean, I’m good, but I’m not so full of myself that I’ll ignore someone fixing to fight me. I kicked through the air and made my way over to the guurdecks.

One of them blasted me with lightning magic and the other used water magic. I intercepted both blasts with a Pistol Punch—but that Pistol Punch got pushed back, and the blasts actually hit my body.

Now that was some good damn fighting.

“Good! Good! Bring it on!”

I was at a slight disadvantage when it came to long-distance combat. Cool, I could deal. I tried to close the distance, but as soon as I got in close enough? Whoosh—a squad of B-Rank monsters got on me all at once and intercepted me with a bunch of spells.

“Argh!” Just as I’d expected, I couldn’t avoid them all and got hit by the whole volley. My legs stopped moving, and I started falling to the ground.

“If you’re gonna get in my way, then I’m gonna hafta start with you!” I cried.

Judging from the way the Rank Bs moved at the command of other monsters, it would be a good idea for me to get them out of the way first. But even those monsters were nothing to sneeze at. Carelessness would be costly. Mid-fall, I unleashed a Pistol Kick with all my strength—much better than a Pistol Punch for a crowd.

Hit about five. Landed on the ground. Then I went back to punching. The surrounding monsters didn’t pay any attention to their fallen fellows—they just zeroed in on me. Not ideal.

See, I didn’t have any real ranged attacks. Sometimes that gets me surrounded, and I have no choice but to break through somehow. There’s one advantage to all that, though. Once I’m surrounded, it’s hard for my opponents to use magic without hitting each other, especially if I get clever and duck. And the closer I am to my enemies—which I have to be, to punch ’em—the closer they are to collateral damage.

I kept on punching while avoiding the magic whizzing past me. I avoided flames, punched. Avoided water, punched. When the group surrounding me finally started to thin out, I realized there weren’t many guurdecks around at all. Only one in this group, matter of fact, just as I’d expect from an A-Rank beastie. It could really blend in with the others though, huh?

“Damn, where the hell’d they go?”

I scanned the area, but I couldn’t see any signs of the other guurdecks. I tried to sense them, but there were so many monsters that I couldn’t really isolate that “guurdeck” feeling—unless? No way, were they coming at me from the rear?!

At that moment, a guurdeck jumped at me from behind the largest B-Rank monster in the group. Surprised the heck out of me, I'll tell you what. In a flash, the guurdeck lunged toward me, its merciless teeth fully bared—there was no way to avoid it.

I tensed my body and focused my strength to take the hit. The guurdeck's fangs dug into my torso.

“Gah?!”

Its jaws were way stronger than I'd expected. I punched that vicious guurdeck square in the snout. I mean, I didn't really unleash a ton of power or anything, but that guurdeck seemed surprised by my counterattack—the thing dashed away.

“Heh. Not bad.” I glanced down at my belly. Thanks to my training, I hardly felt any pain at all, but there *was* the sensation of blood pouring out of my gut. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but it excited me. My lips unconsciously curved into a smile, and reason slipped away a little. Man, I'd never imagined guurdeck bite strength would be so strong.

See, that's why I just can't stop fighting. It's the best. I just can't stop my raging combat spirit from welling up inside me. This was *exactly* what I wanted!

I rushed over to the guurdeck and it let out this low growl. Other monsters got between us, so I couldn't get close. At least the B-Rank monsters seemed to have given up on the idea of surrounding me. Now they just wanted to keep me away from the guurdeck.

The remaining B-Ranks arranged themselves in a line and launched another volley of magic. I took a few hits, but I was gonna get that guurdeck. It came to me. When I got close enough to land a punch on the B-Rank line, my target guurdeck lunged at me, raking across my flesh with its sharp front claws as the others flanked me.

That cut would've cut an ordinary person in two, but it left only a thin scratch on me. Compared to the bite before, this was weaksauce. The guurdeck had a strong jaw, but its claws? Not so much.

“My turn.” I let a punch fly, aiming for the guurdeck—but the thing quickly leapt behind another monster. Clever. So it planned to use that B-Rank monster as a shield, huh? “Little ignorant, my guy.”

A B-Rank monster was way too fragile to shield against someone

like me. I pierced right through the monster's body and my punch hurtled on to hit the gurdeck. I could tell by the feeling against my fists; it was down. One more to go.

My focus wandered for just a moment when I thought that, and another gurdeck rushed me from behind. My body trembled—it was trying to use the death of its fellow monster in order to kill its enemy, huh? What a desperate, ferocious fight to survive this was!

The gurdeck tried to bite down hard on me, just like before. I couldn't duck right now, and my steeling defense from before had failed—so I'd just do *this*!

“HOOAH!”

An elbow strike!

It was the most efficient way to attack someone coming from behind. Sure, it had short range, but it was incredibly effective against anybody lunging at you. My well-trained elbow shattered the gurdeck's fangs, and my follow-up strike split the gurdeck clean down the middle, digging a messy hole from mouth to tail.

With that, I cleaned up the rest of the B-Rank monsters, too. Soon enough, I was the only one standing on the battlefield.

“Hrm?”

Strange. The monsters were defeated, but I still sensed something. What was this? It was coming from inside the gurdeck. I backed some distance away from the gurdeck's corpse. In the next instant, there was the sound of tearing from inside the body. It looked like it was... *changing*.

Rising up from the corpse of the gurdeck was a dark-skinned man with two horns growing out of his head.

“Guess ya noticed me. That your ability or something?” asked the man in an easygoing manner, brushing the filth from his clothes like it was nothing.

But man, the feeling emanating from him was downright *sharp*. It was like he'd crossed some boundary to become more than simply alive. The aura roiling out of his body was overwhelming, like his presence alone might even kill some less-skilled adventurer. A cold sweat ran down my chin.

“Nah,” I said, bracing myself. “Nothing like that. Just the result of

my training.”

I had to sharpen my senses. I couldn't lose sight of a single punch or kick. This guy...he could be stronger than me. My senses were already turned up from my battle with the guurdeck, but they were spiking wildly now. I could even hear Gauche talking to someone, even though he had to be hundreds of feet away.

“Unbelievable! A majin appearing in a place like this? Do we have any S-Rank adventurers?! This is an emergency, do you understand?! Get in touch with the commander! If we fail here, then this kingdom—no, this *region* will be utterly annihilated!”

Hmm. Yep. Whatever a “majin” was, this dude was ridiculously strong. I could feel it. And now, right after a fight to the death with some guurdecks, I was gonna fight to the death with a majin.

Man! How cool was that?! I was so excited that I felt like I was gonna burst a blood vessel in my brain. This had to be the happiest moment of my life!

“What?” The majin cracked its neck. “You not gonna come at me? Guess I'll go first.”

I snarled.

“What was that? Are you scared?”

Like hell!

“I'm just happy to fight a strong-lookin' guy like you! Come on, do your best not to let me down, will ya?” I made a little “come at me” gesture with my fingers to piss him off.

He sneered. “Lessee... What's my line? How 'bout this: Lowly human...you really think a human can say somethin' like that that to the mighty majin Lord Bezegamoth?”

The majin guy, Bezegamoth, created a sphere of lightning in his right hand and hurled it at me. I dodged by the skin of my teeth. If I hadn't gotten all revved up from fighting the guurdeck, it would've been lights out for me. That was the fastest magic attack I'd ever seen, for sure—

But not too fast for *my* eyes.



“I got more where that came from!” Bezegamoth cackled, lightning spheres in both hands now.

Dodging two at the same time sounded rough, so I fired my Pistol Punch and aimed right at Bezegamoth’s hands.

Bezegamoth swiftly moved his arms out of the way, avoiding my attack. “I see right through you!”

So he could still react fast even when he was charging his magic. In that case, it was time to rush in—I ran toward Bezegamoth.

He grinned and held out his arms in front of him. “This is a prison of lightning. If ya think you can dodge this one, then try it!”

The lightning that shot forth from Bezegamoth’s palms instantaneously forked out over and around me, boxing me in. Excellent ranged attack. Nowhere I could go to avoid it, no matter how fast I went, and I couldn’t just duck either.

“If I can’t duck, I’ll just push through!” I plowed through the lightning prison without even thinking. Sure, I got a hefty shock, but it wasn’t so bad that I couldn’t move or anything. Looked like the charge was weaker when you spread it out like that.

“What?!” Bezegamoth stared as I escaped the lightning, and for the first time I heard a little panic in his voice. “Are you even human?!”

“You sure you want those to be your last words?”

I punched Bezegamoth. Hard. The sound of my punch landing was like a firework going off right next to you.

But I didn’t feel like I’d killed my opponent. The moment I thought that, an intense pain shot through my face. The pain didn’t stop there. No, it spread through my entire body. By the time I realized I was being hit by a series of point-blank lightning magic attacks, my body had already suffered severe damage.

“Pathetic humans! Majin bodies ain’t soft like your miserable flesh!”

My mind raced. I could tell my ribs and organs had been hit bad, could *feel* it, and with my senses sharpened, I felt the pain even more acutely.

Fine by me, heh. When was the last time I’d found myself in this position? I was feeling nostalgic. Even if I risked everything and gave it

all I had, I didn't know if I'd make it—and that was why I fought!

“You speck! You worm!” Bezegamoth snarled. “Death to you! Graaaaaah!”

I launched a kick at Bezegamoth as he roared junk at me, but his body didn't yield an inch.

“It doesn't matter what you do, human. It's useless! Your kind are a buncha insects compared to our magnificence!”

Ignoring his ravings, I used Bezegamoth's body like a springboard and jumped backwards off of him. If I took any more magic hits like that, I'd have to shed my swole bod and leave this mortal coil.

“I see, I see. You dared to use me, a mighty majin, like a common springboard.” Rage crept into Bezegamoth's voice, and his aura grew a level stronger. He cracked his knuckles audibly. “Putting your feet on *me*... Revolting. Yer gonna be punished for yer transgressions. I'm gonna break every bone in your body. Gonna *snap* ya! Make sure to cry real good for me, couldja?”

“Heh, if you think you can take me, go ahead and try!” I fired back.

But damn it, I was angry with myself, inside. I resented my weakness. I'd really been living under a rock, hadn't I? I didn't even know what a majin was!

“This is the end. Surrender your life in a state of sweet terror, human.” Bezegamoth raised his right arm and summoned another sphere of lightning, twice as large as any he'd made before.

I readied myself. There was no way my body could take a hit from that, not in its current state. Yet there was also no way I was gonna lose. Nah, the only way to beat this guy would be to really give it my all—to dig into myself and give it all I had, but how? And what?

Filia's face flashed in my mind.

“HOOOOAAHHH!”

With my right hand, I tore my left arm from my shoulder and hurled it straight at Bezegamoth's head like a javelin.

“Pointless struggling!” he taunted, guarding against the attack with a sphere of lightning and stopping my left arm, which had probably been traveling about a hundred-some miles per hour.

Exactly as planned!

In those seconds, I closed the distance between us. By discarding my left arm, my speed had increased. My left arm alone was about fifty or sixty pounds, after all. Bezegamoth's own spheres of lightning blocked his vision, so he didn't notice my movements. Also, my left arm got destroyed, but so did his lightning spheres.

"You idiot! What a ridiculous strategy!"

But by the time Bezegamoth noticed where I was, I had him. In fact, I was right in front of him. Bezegamoth jerked in surprise and hastily called up another lightning sphere, but it didn't matter.

With one more hit, it'd be over. I'd kill him before he killed me. Because yeah, the only skill I really had was punching—but I knew damn well how to punch.

"You're done here!" I threw a punch with the most power I'd ever mustered in my entire life. An attack forged from the resolve of tearing away my own arm. The strongest and most powerful magic I'd ever used. Even a majin wouldn't come out of this unscathed, I knew it!

Bezegamoth went flying back in a blur from the force of my all-out attack.

"Tch!" Pain shot through my right arm too, and it sharpened as it ran through the rest of my body. As expected. Still, hoo boy, my shoulders felt like they were on fire. I focused my strength to manage the bleeding, and I raised my head to check where Bezegamoth had landed. What had happened to him? I tried to sense him, and...there he was.

In front of me stood—yeah, stood—a deeply wounded majin. His pupils were dilated, and his veins bulged in his forehead. Oh, and a fist-sized hole in his chest. Jeez, talk about vitality.

"Hey! Hey, *hey*, *HEY*! What the hell did you do?! Whaddya... whaddya think you're *doin'*?! You think you can go against the likes of *me*, lowly human?!"

Before my eyes, the hole in Bezegamoth's chest began to close back up.

"Whoa, you can even use recovery magic, huh?" I said. "Pretty handy."

"Shut the hell up! I ain't going easy on you anymore!" The fist-

sized hole was just about closed, but it didn't completely heal, not all the way.

Hold on, had he run out of magical energy?

Hmm. That reminded me, Filia had once said recovery magic used quite a bit more energy than normal magic.

"To think that a human opponent would challenge me, Lord Bezegamoth," he snarled. "Unforgivable piece of trash! Die, and then die again! Keep dying forever!"

Purple smoke erupted from Bezegamoth's body. I tried firing off a Pistol Kick, but the smoke didn't dissipate. He was definitely using this without magic, which meant that this was Bezegamoth's ability.

A purple haze. Was it poison? If it was, the antibodies I'd generated through training would help, but if I was wrong and it *wasn't* poison, things could well go bad.

I made my decision. I started toward Bezegamoth, slowly walking through the smoke. Bezegamoth's face was right in front of me. Nothing strange happened to my body.

"Are you an idiot?!" Bezegamoth taunted. "Are you a complete idiot?! You just walked right up to me. This smoke is deadly poison. Oh, and don't bother holding your breath, it's pointless. My poison seeps in through your skin, you pathetic fool, and—"

"Poison *this*, idiot." I head-butted him as hard as I could, and wham, down he went. I followed that up with one or two or, I dunno, a few dozen more kicks.

(Seriously, who just goes off talking about their abilities, like blah, blah, blah? C'mon, don't let your guard down. Only idiots go off blabbering.)

"You... How can ya move? Impossible..." Bezegamoth gasped, flustered and exhausted. "Do you have a recovery ability?!"

Wow. I didn't know how anybody could gasp when they were pretty much just a head and a neck. Impressive, honestly. Man, a majin's vitality really was something else. Amazing.

"Just the fruits of my labor," I said. "I got swole."

With that, I stomped down hard on Bezegamoth's face with my heel. Course, I sensed for any signs of life just in case, but I got nothing,

not there or anywhere around.

I finally relaxed, losing the anxiety I had been feeling. My head spun. When I casually looked down at the ground I saw that (oh, right) it was stained deep red with a whole lotta blood. I mean, a *lot* of blood. I'd totally forgotten about trying to stop the blood from my shoulder. Oh, right, and there was the bleeding from my stomach too. All in all, I was pretty light on blood.

Ah. Yeah. Okay. That was problematic.

I gazed down at Bezegamoth's corpse. A majin, huh? He sure was a formidable opponent. To think terrifying guys like him were just walking around in this world. But hey, I was still kicking. Blood was furiously gushing from my wounds, but that just made me feel *alive*.

"Gotta train more. I still got a long way to go..."

I raised my head, and entering my field of vision, I saw Filia running toward me. Then everything went black.

Chapter 7: The Goddess of Healing

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, the first thing I noticed was a plain ceiling. I tried to rub my sleepy eyes, but I couldn't feel my arm.

Oh, uh. Right.

I'd fought with some Bezegamoth guy or something. And yeah, I'd ripped my own arm off and chucked it at him.

Hm. Could Filia fix this?

I'd remembered Filia's face when I was fighting Bezegamoth, and I'd thought to myself, "Well, she can probably heal me," so I'd ripped it right off. But, uh, what would happen if she couldn't?

Could I still fight with one arm?

"Oh, you're finally awake, huh?"

I heard a deep, brash voice coming from my left, and turned toward it. Babandongas lay there, his legs bandaged up. The hair on his head was sharp and pointy to an almost disgusting degree, as always, like he had a bunch of horns growing out of his skull. Sitting on the chair next to Babandongas's bed was his little sister, Voltemia. It didn't seem like she'd been seriously injured. Also, as usual, the moment you saw them was the moment you thought how totally different they looked.

"Is this a hospital?" I asked. "You were fighting monsters too, huh?"

"Yeah, well, kinda. Voltemia and I joined up later, and the two of us only took out a single gurdeck. Not really anything to be proud of. No big deal."

"Big Brother wasn't on the front line. His job was to rescue the wounded and get them off the battlefield. But when I got attacked by a gurdeck, he protected me and got hurt..."

"C'mon, It's only natural for a big brother to protect his little sister. Of course I was gonna defend you, Voltemia. Besides, you've been takin' care of me since I got injured, right? We're takin' care of

each other,” said Babandongas.

“O-okay,” replied Voltemia, nodding.

Babandongas gently stroked her pale blue hair. This brother and sister pair got along so well that I was honestly kinda jealous.

“Okay, I’m going to head home. See you later, Big Brother. And you too, Yuri.”

“Be careful on your way home!”

“See ya,” Babandongas called. He looked lonely for a while, but he finally turned to me and spoke. “You and I gotta show our gratitude to Filia.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Oh, since ya just woke up, I guess you don’t know. Filia saved more than thirty people on that battlefield! If it wasn’t for her, you and I’d probably be dead. It’s really rare for a magician to be that skilled in recovery magic.”

Whoa, Filia did something that amazing? Me, I could only destroy stuff, so I had nothing but respect for her.

“Yuri! You’re awake!” Speak of the devil, huh? Filia came into our room in the hospital, fatigue plain on her face. Filia’s battle had been difficult too.

“I made you worry, huh?”

“Yes, you absolutely did! When you were facing that majin, I thought you were—you’d be...! But I wasn’t skilled enough to rush in and help. I couldn’t even follow what was happening, and I...I was really worried...”

Filia walked up to my bed and rested her hand on my stomach for a moment as I lay there. Then she rested her head on top of that. So soft... I smelled the faint scent of flowers mixed with the tang of blood.

And, uh, then it started to hurt a little. Did Filia know she was resting her head on my open wound? Well. I guess this was a kind of training too.

“I heard from Babandongas,” I said. “He said you saved us. Thank you.” I don’t know why, but for some reason I was getting super embarrassed.

At that, Filia realized Babandongas was in the same room as us

and shrank away from me. “O-oh, B-Babandongas! Ha. Um. You’re here too, I see.”

“Dontcha mind me, you guys! You two just flirt all you like, okay?” teased Babandongas, flashing us a broad grin. When he smiled like that, he almost had a rugged pirate look going.

“D-don’t say stupid things like that, please! Right, Yuri?”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna hear anything from Mr. Bedhead here.” Just too spiky...

“This is just my hairstyle! Besides, I don’t wanna hear that from *you*, always goin’ off about ‘muscles’ this and ‘muscles’ that, Mr. Musclebrain!”

“Whoa. I wouldn’t go *that* far.” To think Babandongas was a guy who knew the power of muscle, huh? He’d suddenly complimented me on my muscles, so I couldn’t help but smile. When Babandongas saw that, he started holding himself, as if he had just witnessed something horribly repulsive.

“What in the...” Babandongas stammered. “What are ya actin’ all flattered for?!”

“Our Yuri has a rather unique worldview.”

You know what? I’d count that as a compliment too.

“Oh, right, Filia. Can you fix my arm?”

Filia put her index finger to her chin and pondered for a moment. “If my magical energy were full, then I could, but we’d have to wait till tomorrow for that. That might be too late, though. Your body might get used to its current state, and then even recovery magic wouldn’t return your arm.”

Apparently, recovery magic was a kinda magic that restored the target “back to a natural state of being.” If enough time passed that my body got used to not having my left arm, that was the new normal, and my missing arm was outta luck.

“More importantly, Yuri, it really wouldn’t have been strange if you’d died back there. That is to say, it’s honestly shocking that you’re not dead. You can thank me any moment for that, by the way.” Filia puffed her chest out proudly. “Ahem?”

She was right. I’d been pulled through a perilous situation without

even knowing it. "I can't thank you enough, really."

"Of course you can't. You're so grateful, in fact, that you feel like you owe me big time, don't you? Tee hee, how about you lick the bottom of my foot?" Filia smirked bewitchingly while taking off her shoe.

When I saw her do that, I was just like, man, her legs are amazing. Her pale, slender calves looked like fine porcelain. It was almost like they could completely captivate anyone who saw them!

"What's the matter?" Filia teased. "Didn't you understand me? I'm just so cute that I've rendered you mute."

"Oh, nah, it's just... 'Lick my feet', huh? That's, uh, not *my* thing, but..."

Filia's smirk vanished. "Um...what?"

"After all you've done, I can't really deny you, even if you've got some kind of *proclivity*, and I don't wanna reject you or anything... But please don't try and draw me into a scene I'm not into, all right? Not my thing."

I spoke calmly and firmly. She needed to understand I was serious.

Oh come on, how could I not mess with her a little? She was being so smug!

Filia furiously shook her head and hands in a panic. "N-no, that's not it! I-I was just messing around a little..."

"Oh yeah, for sure. Let's just call it that and move on, eh?" I said solemnly. "That's probably best for the both of us."

Must...not...laugh. Must...bear with it...longer.

"No, it's not like that. I was playing around, really." Filia was turning shades of pink and red that you couldn't even see without muscled eyes. Maybe it was about time I wrapped this up.

Just then, Babandongas let out a snort. "Oho, Filia, y-y-you want *me* to lick your feet?"

"I was only joking!" she shouted.

"Bwa ha!" And *now* I had to laugh.

Aw, Babandongas, no! This was no good. I'd fought the majin and lived, but now I was gonna die laughing!

Filia stared at Babandongas and me as we both laughed hysterically. She finally seemed to realize she was being teased.

“Yuri, Babandongas,” she said with a sniff. “You two were just making fun of me, weren’t you?! I’ll never forget this, you two!” She looked furious, but more huffy than scary.

Still, the sudden aura emanating from her was incredible. I honestly did feel a little bad now. I never wanted to make her angry. Had I gone too far?

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just trying to hide the fact that I find you so overwhelming and I had to put on a little act.”

Filia folded her arms. “H-hm! I-I’m going home!” She turned on her heels and power-walked out, sniffing to herself.

Aw no, had I really made her mad this time?

“Man, you’re a natural-born womanizer!” said Babandongas, looking dumbfounded.

“Huh?” I blinked. “I don’t get what you mean at all.”

Man, Babandongas said the weirdest stuff...

Gauche arrived the next day. He was dressed in the same white uniform that he usually wore.

“Salutations, my friend! I dropped by to pay you a visit. You have my deepest gratitude for your assistance in the battle. If it weren’t for you, Mussen Morgeth would surely have been lost. I am truly grateful to you. Now, how are your injuries?” Gauche bowed to us.

I hadn’t really fought for the city or anything, but I still felt kinda flustered by that.

“I have a compound fracture in my leg,” said Babandongas. “I’m going to get recovery magic cast on me the day after tomorrow, then they’re planning to discharge me from the hospital.”

“Filia’s gonna fix my arm today, and then I’m being discharged too,” I added.

“I see. I’m very glad the two of you are still alive. More

importantly, though... Well, as a friend, I need to tell you two that this country may get grow more tumultuous in the days to come.”

Right, yeah. Hm. That got me thinking of a question. “Hey, I heard you say something about majin or whatever. What exactly are those?”

Gauche looked pretty darn serious as he answered. “Majin are said to possess the power of monsters, or to be the reincarnation of demons. They are known for having two horns protruding from their heads, as well as dark-hued skin, though apparently there are exceptions to the latter. Their bodies are unusually sturdy, and they have an extremely high amount of magical energy. For the most part, they reside in the Demon Kingdom. We aren’t typically in any danger from them, but at times individuals like this Bezegamoth character see fit to initiate an assault. I suspect he was a strong opponent even among the majin.”

Gauche frowned. “Now listen, Sir Yuri. The number of human beings at a level where they can triumph against a majin are so few that I can count them on my fingers, but the number of strong majin—stronger than Bezegamoth—I don’t like to think.”

Whoa, stronger than that guy? Awesome! How many more powerful dudes could I fight?!

Uh, um, hm. Right then, it was probably smarter to ask more questions. “Wait a minute, so if we got invaded by the Demon Kingdom, wouldn’t that mean the end of humanity?”

A whole kingdom of demons and monsters? It sounded like bad news.

“Well, as I understand it, the main reason that hasn’t yet happened is that the current Demon King considers himself quite the intellectual. He’s the sort of man who values peace, and I’d say he’s the reason why there aren’t *more* incidents involving majin. Our order’s commander is another reason. It’s said that he is, without a doubt, the strongest human on the planet, with power rivaling or surpassing even that of the Demon King.”

There was someone out there with that kinda strength?! I wanted to meet him at once, but Gauche told me he roamed through the world and didn’t come home unless it was an emergency.

If I kept adventuring, could I meet him, then? Aw yeah, I had even more to look forward to!

“But as strong as our commander is, very few within our order can fight against majin. I’m afraid I’m about to get quite a bit busier. I can’t guess how many years it will be before I can take my next vacation...” said Gauche, his eyes downcast, looking heartbroken.

He wouldn’t be able to take a day off in *years*? Terrifying.

“My condolences,” Filia said.

“Sounds like you’ve got your hands full,” I said.

“Ha, my thanks, you two,” said Gauche, with a bright and easy smile. “Well, now, I have some others I’d like to offer my gratitude to as well.”

He turned to leave, but even as he smiled, even as he went, this unfathomable sense of melancholy hung over him.

The next day, I was relieved to see Filia in high spirits.

“You’re going to get your arm back now,” she said. “It might feel a little weird, but please bear with it, okay?”

“Thanks for this, I’m counting on you.”

I’d only really understood this after losing it, but not having an arm? Super inconvenient! I was incredibly glad to have Filia around. I sat down on a chair and prepared to receive her healing magic.

Filia gently touched both of my shoulders from behind. Our faces were close, and the smell of flowers tickled my nostrils. My heart started skipping a beat or two, so I hurriedly tried to lower the sensitivity of my nose.

“Is something the matter?” asked Filia.

“No, it’s, ah... I was just thinkin’ that this was the first time you’ve used recovery magic on me since when we fought the brokirin,” I blurted. It was the first excuse I could think of.

Filia tilted her head to the side, a confused look on her face. “Well, I’m about to show you just how much I’ve grown since then. I’m going to heal you so much it’ll be practically disgusting,” she boasted, making peace signs with both hands. It was kind of surreal seeing her

there, a big smug look on her face, opening and closing her fingers in a motion that looked like a crab opening and closing its claws.

I was inwardly relieved that I managed to throw her off somehow, even if my neighbor Babandongas was grinning at me so hugely. Real punchable-like.

“Let’s get started, Yuri. If too many days pass, I won’t be able to heal you.”

“O-okay.”

Filia’s body started glowing a faint white. The light spread to my shoulders, and I felt a soft, pleasant warmth. As the light gathered on my shoulders, I felt a kind of itching, almost. It stayed like that for a while, but then, finally, a new, smooth arm began to grow out of the stump.

At first the arm was transparent, but it became more and more like the real thing until, finally, my arm was fully healed. It looked exactly like the original.

“Whoa, Filia, I knew I could count on you! Uh...hey, what’s the matter?” I felt a weight on my back. Was Filia leaning on me?

“I-I’m all right. Ahh...it’s just...I used a little too much power.”



Filia had a slightly strained look on her face. She let out a little chuckle. Despite somehow managing to stand on her own two feet, her legs wobbled and her breathing was ragged. She was pushing herself too hard.

“Sorry, I don’t wanna wear you out. Thank you.”

“No, it’s okay... I wanted to heal you, and I did. Understand?” said Filia with a sweet smile, putting a hand to her chest to try and catch her breath.

Babandongas held a handkerchief to his eyes. “Oh...such a sweet girl...”

“I’m sure you’re going to have a halo before long, Filia,” I added, and I averted my eyes.

That carefree smile of hers was almost like that of a goddess’s. I couldn’t look directly at it.

“Oh. *Oh!* I see how it is! You’re both teasing me again, aren’t you?! And I’ve worked so hard. You’re both such terrible people. Well, I won’t be fooled this time!” said Filia, growing unexpectedly furious.

Oops. But I didn’t say anything! Ugh, it felt like it’d be weird to correct her on this one.

“All right, let’s get goin’!”

After we let Filia rest for a while, I was discharged from the hospital. I exchanged a brief farewell with Babandongas, and at last, we were off.

“So, what are our plans now?” asked Filia, holding her silver hair down as it fluttered in the wind.

“For the time being, we gotta search for the elf village in Hihi Forest. Reupping your fighting strength is top priority.”

“Then we’ll need to raise our ranks, I suppose...” said Filia with a sigh. “What a pain in the butt.”

“Yeah...” We were still Rank C. It was so *boring* fighting against C-Rank monsters, but we had to in order to earn our laurels.

Soon enough, we arrived back at the inn and got to our room.

“I’m pretty exhausted today,” said Filia, jumping headfirst into bed. She flopped over onto her back and glanced at me. “You’ve changed somehow, Yuri.”

“You think? I don’t know. Really?” I guess I’d probably gotten stronger since leaving the forest. It was great finding out there were people stronger than me out there. My motivation to train was also higher than ever.

“When I first met you, you were kind of scary,” said Filia. “Like a knife, almost. But now you’re more like a dog.”

“A dog... I’ve heard wild dogs are pretty strong. Is that what you mean?”

A knife was no good anyway, you know? I’d be way stronger with bare hands. If I gotta chop something, I can use those.

“Yuri, what on *earth* are you talking about?”

Was I wrong? Filia seemed a little annoyed. But...hmm, come to think of it, it had been a while since Filia and I’d met. It was kinda... It was nice, to think about that.

“Well,” Filia mumbled, almost unintelligibly, “both the old Yuri and the current Yuri...are good, I think.”

Quiet as she was, I could still hear her from all my ear-muscle training. “What do you mean, good? Why are you blushing? I don’t get it.”

“All I know is that you, Yuri, are a Zero Delicacy Man. And that it’s bedtime. I’m going to sleep! Good night, Yuri!” Filia abruptly covered herself up to her head in the futon.

Zero Delicacy Man? Man, Filia had no knack for coming up with names.

“All right, Filia, good night.”

Now that I was the only one awake, I decided to hold my breath and train my lung capacity. For the next hour, all that could be heard in the room was the sound of Filia breathing.

Come morning, Filia woke up, I stopped doing my one-handed pinky-finger push-ups, and we got ready to go.

“Should we head to the guild?” asked Filia.

“Depends. You feeling okay?”

Filia twisted her hips a couple of times to test her mobility. “No problems here. And your arm, Yuri?”

“No problems here either.” This new arm was exactly the same as the original. Just to be sure, I’d moved it around a bunch yesterday and during my night exercises, and so far it seemed to handle all that indoor training just fine.

“Naturally. I *am* the one who treated you, after all.”

“Yeah, for sure!”

From there, we headed off to the guild. We had to get to Rank A fast to check out Hihi Forest. Even the process of doing that rank-climbing might help Filia get better at defending herself before we even got to the elf village.

When we got to the guild, we found ourselves keenly followed by the eyes of our fellow adventurers.

“Hey, wait, isn’t that the inhuman master of muscles or whatever—the one who defeated the majin?”

“Yo, wait a minute, why’s a goddess walking around with that muscle-bound dude?”

“You a newbie or somethin’? Those two are always together for some reason. Most likely, he’s Lady Filia’s escort.”

“Aw, man, Filia-tan is totally my waifu!”

I see. So the story of that battle was getting around, huh? Maybe some of the adventurers here had joined in the battle too.

“Looks like I’m pretty popular.” Filia beamed. “I’m simply adorable, so I suppose that isn’t exactly surprising.”

“Oh yeah? How about I spread the word that you’re the kind of person who wants people to lick her feet?” I replied with a wink.

“Dear Yuri,” said Filia with a smug smile, “it’s so hard to be beautiful. Must you add to my trials?”

“Ugh, give me a break...”

Still, Filia covered her face with her hands. I wasn't really going to spread the word about that little incident, honestly. We were way too busy to bother with that crowd, ya know? Anyway, we picked up a random C-Rank request, lined up at the counter, and handed the request letter over to the receptionist.

"Hello, I'm glad to—oh goodness, Sir Yuri? Lady Filia? The head of the guild would like to have a chat with you. Would you mind waiting a moment?" asked the receptionist.

"Eh, why not?"

"Thank you very much. Well then, please wait here for a moment. I will return in just a second," said the receptionist.

Filia and I looked at each other.

"All right, Yuri. Fess up. What did you do?"

"Nothing! I think."

"Of course you *think*. But your standards of behavior are positively eldritch when compared to the average person, Yuri. Even if you don't *think* something you did was bad, well, how would you feel if someone did those things to *you*? Would that feel bad?!"

"Hey! I feel like you're gettin' a little ahead of yourself!" She'd just slipped naturally into a lecture. *Come on, Filia, I'm not your kid!*

"Y-yes, I suppose so. I'm sorry..." Filia sighed, eyes cast downward. "I got a bit mean there, didn't I?"

She looked so depressed that it was actually a little upsetting. I might have snapped a little too much myself.

"W-well," I mumbled, "it's true that I'm always causing trouble. So you might have a point, Filia."

After she saw me all flustered, trying to smooth things over, Filia covered her mouth with her hands and, in a quiet voice, whispered: "Gotcha."

I narrowed my eyes. "I can hear you, Filia. I'll remember that."

"Hmph! Consider it *payback*." She punctuated her statement with a sly wink. "A Filia doesn't forget!"

The wink was almost audibly cute—the adventurers who saw her do it couldn't seem to suppress their excitement.

“A goddess...”

“I finally found the girl of my dreams! I couldn’t ask for more!”

“What in the world...?! How could such a beautiful creature possibly exist in this universe?!”

“Nngaah! *Nngaahhh!*” Some of them even wailed like they’d regressed to infancy from the shock of it all.

A bizarre atmosphere dominated the entire guild. Even Filia looked perplexed.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” said the receptionist. “If you’ll please follow me, ah... Is something the matter?”

“Nah...”

“N-nothing! It’s fine!”

Leaving the riled-up adventurers behind, we followed the receptionist to the back of the guild. She came to a stop before an ornate door.

“This is the Guild Master’s room.”

She opened it for us, then went inside. Filia and I followed. The room was just as luxurious as the door itself. The floor was made from some expensive-looking stone material, and mounted on the wall was a stuffed monster head. (Luxurious don’t mean tasteful.)

“Sorry to have you come all the way here,” said a voice coming from a white screen hanging on the wall. The voice seemed to be coming from a person on that screen, but we couldn’t see who was speaking. Everything but the top of the figure’s white-haired head was hidden from view. I guess the chair was too big for whoever was sitting in it? “Oof, I’m afraid that moving has just become so tiresome these days. Here we go, and...”

The person stood up on the chair, and we finally saw her head. She had a gentle face, if wrinkled by age. Despite her calm expression, I sensed a kind of inner ferociousness, hidden from sight, even through this screen.

She’d probably been a formidable master of her martial art when she was younger, huh? I wished I could’ve met her about a half-century earlier.

“Madam, would you please tell us what you wanted to talk about?”

Thank you.” I tried to use the respectful language I’d learned from Filia. Being an intellectual muscle man, I quickly got the hang of using such terminology. First things first: You gotta remember to add ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’”

“Well, now, there’s no need to be in such a rush. After all, there’s nothing in life you need to hurry for,” said the Guild Master, slowly pouring some tea into a cup. After a long sip, she finally began. “Now, then. The reason I called you here today is, ah... What was it, again?”

“Guild Master, it’s regarding the monster incident in Mussen Morgeth,” said the receptionist.

Uh—forget the earlier assessment. Was this old lady okay? Could she really handle things as the head of the guild?

“Oh yes, of course. Regarding the mass outbreak of monsters in town and the subsequent demon attack. Considering your achievements, we have decided to raise your adventurer rank to A. It would make me very happy if you would continue to work hard in your endeavors in this regard.”

Whoa! Talk about a lifesaver.

“Thank you very much, please!”

That reminded me, Gauche had said something about a demon attack being treated like an emergency or something, hadn’t he? Guess we were almost lucky we got to show off.

“Those S-Rank fellows,” the Guild Master continued, “they’re just not up to *responsibility*. They’re too free, can’t count on them to fight when it’s important. But can I count on you two?”

Her eyes flashed, and a chill ran down my spine. Hold on a sec! We were just a couple of newbies who only just got to Rank A—she talked like we were soldiers in her war.

“Well, anyone is free to have expectations,” I said, with a fearless glare of my own. “They’re expectations.”

We glared at each other for a long minute until, finally, the Guild Master looked away. The ferocity I’d sensed earlier, that sharp gleam so palpable I could feel it through a screen, dissipated like a dream.

“Oho, marvelous! Guess it’s time for me to go to sleep now. You handle the rest now,” said the Guild Master.

“Understood,” said the receptionist.

With the buck passed, the Guild Master fell asleep then and there, still standing in her chair. When I saw the Guild Master blowing snot bubbles from her nose as she snored, that’s when I knew—she was *strong*! Not just anyone’s strong enough to fall asleep standing up. Even a baby knows that.

The receptionist started explaining things in place of the soundly sleeping Guild Master. Now that we were Rank A, we could accept requests from the kingdom itself. Also, A-Rank requests were significantly more difficult than Rank B and under, and they had a higher mortality rate too.

“It is also possible to decline the designation of Rank A,” she said. “Would you like to do so?”

“No way, I’m not turning it down.”

“Neither will I. I’m with Yuri.”

We’d always stood out over the other adventurers at lower ranks and, on top of that, getting to Rank A was essential. We needed license to travel to Hihi Forest.

“Thank you for your patience. We’ve now addressed all guild business for today. I sincerely apologize for taking up so much of your time.” The receptionist bowed respectfully and precisely at the end of her explanation.

At last, we left the guild. The sun hung directly overhead in the sky.

“How about we do some training today instead of a request? Training!” I punched the air (lightly).

“Fine, but my goodness, you sure are motivated all of a sudden. What’s with that?”

“Huh? Come on, you know why, Filia. Good grief. Talk about disappointing.” I shrugged and spread out my arms for a really good “good grief” gesture. “There was the whole thing with the Verkis Bandits, and then the majin incident? We *just* saw what it was like fighting someone of higher rank than us, right? Well, I’ll tell ya how we’re gonna beat strong opponents like that. We gotta be stronger than they are!”

“You sound like a toddler.”

“Well, the truth tends to come from mouth of babes!” Dang, I was really rockin’ it today, like some kinda wisdom machine. And that was probably the first time that the words “tends to” came out of my mouth too. Intellectual Muscle strikes again!

“When it comes to fighting, I’ll trust your judgment, Yuri. *When it comes to fighting.*”

Hurray! Right? Ehh, it made me happy to be trusted. “All right, let’s go!”

“Indeed. Let’s get going.”

The rest of that day, we trained until it felt like our eyes were going to fall out of our heads. Man, trainin’ really is fun. Even my muscles seemed happy.

Chapter 8: It Ain't Like Dirt Is Tasty

A FEW DAYS AFTER MY ARM was restored, Filia and I left for the Hihi Forest. A vast expanse of red earth and sky stretched out for as far as the eye could see. This was the wilderness, the *real* wilderness, and I was getting pumped! This kind of scenery really gave you a sense of adventure. After taking in the sights for a while, a loud cry brought me back to reality.

“Gorrooooo!”

Oho, and then the monsters finally descended. I’d been waiting for this.

I threw a fist at one of the monsters in front of us, whose bodies looked like big lumps of dirt. In a matter of minutes, every one of the earth-like monsters had breathed their last.

“Phew...” It was lunchtime already, so it was the perfect time for monsters to show up for a good punch. “Filia, let’s eat.”

But Filia, who normally always got excited when mealtime came around, had a kind of gloomy look on her face today. I guess the reason was obvious.

“We really have to eat *this*?!” She wrinkled her nose at the piles of dead earthy monsters.

“We don’t got any other food.” I used to go looking high and low for monsters to hunt back home, so I was happy that the food came to us.

“They don’t look tasty at all,” Filia grumbled, but we didn’t have much of a choice.

As Filia gave me a sidelong glance, hesitating, I took a bite. I continued gobbling it down in silence.

Watching cautiously, Filia approached me. “C-could it actually be tasty, despite how it looks?”

“You’ve heard about dirt, right? Well, it’s dirtish.”

The first thing I'd noticed was the crunchy roughness, this sandy kinda mouthfeel. There was a cacophony of chattering noises inside my head as I ate, enough to vibrate my head. What followed after was a faint metallic taste on my tongue. Yep, it wasn't much different from just ingesting plain iron and dirt.

"Wh-what dirt tastes like? That's..."

"Yeah, it's nasty, to say the least. Like, super incredibly nasty." I was positive this wasn't something humans were meant to ingest. And I'd chowed down on lots of stuff in the forest before, but never dirt. It's just not food for eating, you know? However, if we didn't nourish ourselves at all, how were we gonna keep up our strength?

Slowly, reluctantly, Filia brought a bite to her mouth.

"Blech! Blech! Yuri, it's nasty! It's really nasty!"

"Think of it as mouth training."

"Ugh, I wanna train with Slime Jelly..."

We continued on our way without further incident. Real boring. I wanted a really strong monster to pop up!

On the second day, we came upon a small, peaceful village.

"Mama, look, strangers."

"Oh my, you're right. Must be adventurers. How unusual."

Apparently, because this village sat smack-dab in the middle of nowhere, it wasn't exactly a convenient stop for travelers. Hardly anyone visited. I felt a little uncomfortable since the villagers stared at us with curious looks, but I got used to it soon enough. Then a thought popped into my brilliant mind: Could this be a chance for me to spread the good word about the splendor of muscle?

I took action as soon as the idea popped into my mind. The villagers were curious, gathering around Filia and I, and I began my muscle class. I busted off my clothes and unleashed my muscles—and then proceeded to show off my well-developed bod to the crowd.

"These"—wiggle wiggle—"are pectoral muscles. No one who

trains their muscles is a bad person. Muscles hold the world together!"

"Eww, super gross!"

"He looks like a monster!"

"Eeeek!"

"What a bizarre thing to show children!"

Tragically, my muscle class was so unpopular that the village chief came out to see what the fuss was about.

"Yuri," Filia whispered, "please shut up now."

Huh? Had I done something wrong?

"My, my! Travelers, what is going on here?" The village chief stepped forward. He was an elderly man with a hunch, so his already short stature appeared even shorter, but I found his hoarse voice calming.

"I'm very sorry," said Filia, bowing. "My companion has done something a bit, ah, unusual, but I swear he didn't mean any harm by it."

I followed Filia's lead and bowed. I didn't think I'd done anything wrong at all, but this situation—that is to say, this incredible spectacle of children running around and bawling their eyes out while their parents desperately struggled to soothe their agonized cries—was, admittedly, a pandemonium of my own creation.

It was unfortunate that my love of muscles had been misunderstood. Truly regrettable.

"I suppose it's a cultural gap, then. I will overlook it," said the village chief.

That's what you'd expect of a real leader, a broad-minded fellow. We then made a deal with the village chief: In exchange for handing over some materials we'd harvested from A-Rank monsters, he gave us real people food—to Filia's obvious relief.

"Well, now that we've wrapped up here, how about we head to the elf village?" I asked.

"Yes, let's."

"Hold on a minute!" As we were about to leave, a young man called out and stopped us in our tracks. He must've been—what,

seventeen? Eighteen? His hair stood up on end, and he was breathing heavily through his nose, like he was really excited about something.

“What do you want?” I asked.

The young guy grinned. “You guys must be really strong to make it out this far! Have a match with me?”

“Fool! Enough!” the village chief snapped.

The village chief tried to stop him, but the young man wouldn’t listen. Seemed like this was the chief’s grandson, and he yearned to be an adventurer, but the chief wanted to keep the kid out of harm’s way.

“You worry about me way too much, Gramps! I’m strong! I’m the only one in the village who can hunt a toutou all by himself!”

I didn’t know what a toutou was, but if this guy was the strongest person in the village, then he had to be tough. Lower B-Rank monsters ran rampant around this area, after all. Mostly, though, I couldn’t refuse a challenge to fight.

“I’ll do it.”

Filia groaned. “I’ll leave this to you, but getting carried away and killing him or something is *absolutely* forbidden, you hear me?!”

C’mon, there was no way I’d do something like that! Didn’t she trust me?

The young man and I went to a clearing where we turned to face each other. I checked out his stance to appraise the kid.

Yeah, we were looking at lower-middle, rank-wise. Sure, he was strong, but only when it came to ordinary people.

“All right, then,” sighed the chief, “I’ll toss a coin. The moment it hits the ground, the battle will start. Taking the opponent’s life is prohibited. You hear that? Prohibited! *Prohibited*, okay? All right, please be very careful...”

The old man looked at me with wide, imploring eyes brimming with anxiety. Jeez, first Filia and now the old guy? Did nobody trust me? I mean, I’d heard him! He said it three times! As an intellectual muscle man, I was the most active listener I knew.

“Hey dude, you’d better pay attention!” The kid brimmed with at least as much enthusiasm as his grandpa had anxiety. “I mean, with all the muscle ya got on ya, you’re probably just a big slowpoke, aren’t ya?”

Being that overly muscular and gigantic is just stupid lame. I bet you're just doin' magic!"

"I *am* a magician."

"Whoa, really? Ah, dude, sorry."

"Yep. I'm a master of muscle magic." I flexed.

When I did so, the young man started shaking. What was this? Was he so deeply moved by my radical bod?

"M-muscle magic? Come on man, don't mess with me! Ain't no way I could ever be scared of a super lame muscle-bound meathead like you!"

"I see," I said with a solemn nod. "Now it is time. I shall allow you to experience the sublime awesomeness of muscle."

The old man tossed the coin up in the air over his head, and it landed down on the ground. I stepped forward and threw a punch.

"Eh?" With that dumbfounded sound, the kid flew back. I didn't even need to punch him directly. The pressure from my fist going through the air was powerful enough to deal with him.

I closed the distance between us and raised my flat hand over the young man's neck where he lay collapsed. "You still wanna do this?"

At the sight of my readied strike, the kid broke out in a cold sweat over his entire face. "Y-you got me..."

"That's enough!" the village chief cried. "The winner is Yuri!"

He just sounded relieved that his grandson hadn't beefed it.

"That is the power of muscle magic—and, by extremely logical extension, muscles. Wonderful, isn't it?" I grabbed the kid by the arm and pulled him back up, but he looked unconvinced.

"How in the world can you move so fast?"

"Because I've trained," I explained.

"Because you've trained? Pfft. I don't get it. What, are all you adventurers freaks or something?"

"Nothing like that at all. You just need to be agile enough to be able to create an afterimage of yourself. With enough training, even you can do it."

At that, the young man let out a soft chuckle. "I guess...I guess I'm

gonna keep on livin' here in this village. I don't think I'd get anywhere even if I became an adventurer."

Really? Had he had a change of heart, somehow? Well, I wasn't going to meddle in other people's life choices. As his elder, I decided to just give him a bit of advice. "I see. That's certainly a valid path, but remember to work on your muscles, ya know? They're the source of everything."

We left the village a little later that evening.

"I'm so glad that you two came," said the village chief, politely bowing to us.

"Nah, it wasn't that big a deal." In fact, all I'd done was fight.

He glanced at Filia. "If I may, I assume you're heading for the Hihi Forest?"

"Yeah, that's exactly right."

"Ah. Then please, listen carefully: They say that one of the Sinmarch, 'Crazy Face' Misery Mosery, has recently murdered another elf in a town near here. Please be cautious."

Misery Mosery—the mastermind behind the Elf Hunting incidents, huh? Hmm. What if he sniffed out the location of Filia's home village? Maybe we needed to hurry up.

"I understand," I said. "Thank you for the warning."

We proceeded with all speed toward our destination, the Hihi Forest—and extra carefully, at that.

"From what they say, we should hit the woods any minute now."

"Yeah. H-hey, that's it! Over there!"

About five days after leaving the city of Mussen Morgeth, we finally caught sight of the forest. Right as we did, though, I got this faint sense of discomfort, like something was out of place. The forest... was it shaking?

The rhythmic sway of the trees was so different from how something just fluttered in the wind...and there was this odd sound too,

a kind of “doon doon doooooon” sound coming from the direction of the forest. I turned to Filia to ask her opinion.

“Hey, Filia...”

“Doon doon doooooon! Doon doon doooooon!” she sang. “What is it, Yuri? We’re almost there, aren’t we?”

Filia kept singing. Just singing merrily, and the smile on her face that couldn’t get any broader. I couldn’t help but stare.

At that, Filia lowered her voice, as if she had noticed something. “Um,” she said, “is there a monster nearby?”

Wait, did she think that was why I was looking at her?

“Hey, Filia. Is there somethin’ kind of weird about this forest?” I asked.

“Weird? I don’t think so...”

“I see...” Was I the weird one?

The sound grew louder and louder the closer we got to the forest, and the movement of the trees became too obvious to ignore.

Finally, we entered the forest—and found it dancing. It sang, too. On top of that, it glittered and shone. The tree trunks twisted and turned with the rhythm, as some loud, deep sound from somewhere unseen harmonized with it, and everything glowed as if hung with strands of lighting.

Could you really call this a forest? These plants were awfully, uh, assertive.

“Ah, it’s always so lovely when the forest is lively,” said Filia wistfully, her whole face lighting up as she gazed around.

I guess the difference in our values was getting in the way again. Well, seeing as the forest seemed to soothe Filia’s nerves, so I guess it all worked out?

“Doon doon doooooon!”

“Filia, don’t forget why we came here, okay? You know, to get your abilities back?” I reminded her.

She just kept on singing, and not even well, to be honest. Honestly, she was kinda awful. You'd expect Filia to be pretty good at that kind of thing, but nope.

"Ha?!" She gasped. "T-to say something so humiliating... Oh, I'll make you pay sooner or later, you!"

Oh, right, Telepathy.

Filia puffed out her cheeks angrily and gave me a glare. I mean, she could glare at me all she wanted, but it lacked any real bite considering how far she had to crane her neck to look up at me.

We pushed deeper into the annoying forest as it sang. All the songs all over the place had to be a real pain for the elves, with their great hearing and all—overwhelming, and probably risky if you wanted to hear an intruder.

Around then, I sensed an enemy approaching and called out to Filia. "It's—"

"—coming from the right, I know." Filia was combat-ready before I finished. As soon as the gigantic toad-like monster popped out, she sliced it up with wind magic.

"Good job noticing that one."

"It was thanks to the Doon Trees," said Filia. "They change their sound when creatures are close by. We elves can recognize the sound, and we use it to hunt."

I listened more carefully to the singing but couldn't hear what she was talking about. The elves probably developed that sense from infancy or something, so it wasn't something I could just learn overnight. And now it made sense why the elves lived here: If they were the only ones who could gather such information from the local sounds, they had a distinct advantage in this territory.

"All right," I said, "I'm countin' on you."

"Leave it to me."

Sure thing. I'd rely on her—I *did* rely on her—but I made sure not to get lazy about it.

A few minutes passed before we encountered another monster.

"Something's coming. From the left."

"Got it."

I lagged a moment behind Filia, but I still sensed it. When the monster approached, we saw this red-haired beast, this sorta cross between a horse and a boar.

“Bring it.” I extended my arm, flattened my palm, and gestured with my fingers to try to provoke the monster. The monster rushed me, just as planned.

“Groarr!”

“Predictable.” I lined up my fist with the monster’s head and countered its rush. The monster promptly exploded. “Phew. It’s honestly nice that I don’t have to go easy on these things.”

“*Phew*? That’s what you have to say for yourself? The forest is in an uproar right now because of all the noise you’re making, Yuri! Don’t you hear the cries of the forest?”

Not really? I mean, there was the “doon doon doooooon” sound that had gone all “mmm mm,” I think? Maybe? Ugh, how did this stuff even work?

“Sorry about that. We any closer to your village?”

“I don’t know. This path isn’t familiar, so it’s probably a little while longer yet,” Filia mumbled.

Just like Filia had said, in the end, the day ended without the faintest whiff of any elf village. Surely this was the right forest, at least—I’d never heard of anything like Doon Trees before. Tomorrow was definitely our day. At least Filia had gotten used to camping out in the open.

I eyed our surroundings for now; we needed to stay vigilant.

“I want to sleep today,” I said. “Can you keep an eye on the perimeter for an hour?”

Going without sleep for five days wasn’t really a problem for me. However, we had reason to fear those Sinmarch guys were nearby, and I couldn’t say for sure I wouldn’t need every little edge I could get if one of ’em showed.

“Sure. That’s a small price to pay for all you’ve done for me.”

I was grateful that Filia so happily agreed, and I climbed up a tree.

Come to think of it, the trees had stopped dancing and shouting a while after the sun went down. I guess they slept or something.

Whatever the reason, at least they wouldn't be bothering my Zs.

“Are you really going to sleep in a tree?”

“Yeah. I can't help being less alert when I sleep. But if I'm up here, I maintain a sense of danger, even if it's just a little bit.”

(Also, there are fewer aerial monsters than ground-dwelling beasties.)

She sighed. “Well, good night.”

“Yeah, 'night.” I closed my eyes...

Hmm. When had I suddenly stopped being worried about Filia? Up until recently, I'd been hyper-wary all the time, at least in the back of my mind. Maybe it was time to stop being so ridiculous about that.

I thought about that for a few moments before closing my eyes fully and falling asleep.

Chapter 9: Elf Village

“**G**OOD MOOOORNING, Yuuuri!” said Filia as she woke up, though she looked a little sleepy yet herself.

Tired or not, her cheery mood didn’t really match this deadly forest where a monster could leap out at you any time. But then, Hihi Forest was Filia’s home, her birthplace. I suppose that was why she was less cautious.

“Looks like you slept well,” she added.

“Thanks to you.”

(By the way, I wasn’t watching Filia’s sleeping face when she conked right out, of course. As a perfect gentle muscle man, no way would I perform such a gaze of creepery!)

“It would be okay if you slept just a *little* bit though...”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“Nothing really. Shall we get going?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The sun was fully risen, and Filia and I trekked through the forest once again. Right as we got back to our search, the trees started singing and dancing. Seemed the elves weren’t a great market for alarm clocks.

As I followed Filia deeper and deeper into the forest, the landscape changed. Only Doon Trees grew in the area facing the outside of the forest, but now, deeper, plants like ivy and fruited trees I didn’t recognize sprang up. Ah man, I loved eating mystery fruits for training purposes, but I had to restrain myself. I mean, what if we were just moments away from arriving at the elf village? I was hesitant to eat anything.

“Ah!” Filia broke me out of my juicy, fruity thoughts with a sudden shout.

“What’s the matter?”

“Yuri, I recognize this place.”

“Oh, so we’re not too far off?”

“That’s right! We should be there in about, oh, thirty minutes.” There was a hint of joy in Filia’s voice as she said that. What was she so happy about? Sure, we still didn’t know what would happen when she saw the other elves face to face, but when she’d told me the story of how she left, I’d assumed she’d been traumatized.

“Yuri, stay behind me,” said Filia now. “It could be any minute.”

“Got it.”

I stuck close as we walked, step by step, toward the elf village.

“Any minute now, you said?” I said, about twenty minutes later. Right now, I could see a trail underfoot, probably made by repeated foot traffic. Elves, I’d guess.

“Any minute till—ah!” Filia’s shoulders twitched.

Something was odd. “Filia? What’s the ma—oh.”

Moments later, I sensed a ton of presences, all about fifty meters diagonally to the left from us.

“You okay? I can switch places and take the lead if you want,” I said.

Filia had stopped in her tracks—maybe it’d make things easier for her if she stood behind me, keeping her from peoples’ gazes.

Filia just shook her head from side to side. “No, I’m okay. Elves are extremely cautious, so if a member of another species unexpectedly came close to them—by which I mean you, Yuri—it’s possible they could attack. No, this is my problem, and I’ll take the lead.”

“If that’s what you want, all right; I’ll leave it to you.”

Filia’s aloof nature might make you think her careless and detached, but she had a surprisingly childish side, too. And then, deep in her core, she was pretty dang strong. If this was the course Filia decided on, that was what we were doing.

Besides, well, there was a possibility that if I strode in first, the elves might think I’d threatened Filia into leading me to the village.

“Yes, Yuri, please do. Shall I remind you who you’re traveling with? I am the transcendently beautiful elf, Filia,” she replied smugly, but the corners of her mouth twitched ever so slightly. She couldn’t completely hide her nerves.

“Don’t, uh, get on your high horse or anything.” I figured I would try to raise her spirits in my own way, so I tried to keep my response as normal as possible. Not that it really mattered, if she could read my mind whenever she wanted.

Whether or not she had, Filia let out a small sigh and walked forward. “Well, here I go.”

“Okay.”

We walked some little ways forward, took a left turn—and there before us we saw houses made out of trees.

One by one, a crowd of elves formed as they peeked at us from among the houses. Right. Filia had noticed the elves before we got here, so it made sense that the elves had noticed us too. Filia slowly advanced closer toward the village. She stepped on a tree branch—it cracked dryly.

The elves gathered by the village entrance in greater and greater numbers. By the time we actually reached the entrance, over thirty elves had gathered there. Absolutely all of them was almost perfectly beautiful. *Weirdly* beautiful, to the point where it seemed impossible.

“Lia... Lia, is that you?” A beautiful young man called out to Filia in a trembling voice. Was he a friend of Filia’s? He looked to be about twenty, maybe a little older than her. He had silver hair just like Filia, but his hair looked a bit, uh, tougher? Maybe that was a dude thing?

Filia turned to face the handsome young man and greeted him with a bow. “Yes, Father. It’s me, Lia.”

Uh. *Father*? Wait, there was no way he could be her father, because she—he—

“Lia! You just disappeared without warning! Do you have any idea how worried your mother and I were?”

No way, seriously? What I saw before me *was* a touching scene: a father rejoicing, embracing his daughter with tears in his eyes. But if you didn’t know that, they could’ve been a couple of lovers. Had to be, even! But nope, all the elves looked to be around the same age, so there

was no complicated family situation here.

What incredible people. Did they just stop aging at some point partway? I was a little jealous. No matter how much you train, you can never out-swole old age. Elves are young for a long, long time. Maybe they were better than the rest of us, in that way.

The crowd was shouting out now too.

“Filia, you came back!”

“Such a beautiful face, as always!”

“Today is an auspicious day!”

They welcomed Filia back with open arms. I guess?

“Lia, who is that human?”

Ah, I’d caught the eye of Filia’s father.

“This is Yuri. He’s my...partner.”

“Hello, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said, demonstrating my sheer talent at respectful language. Perfect, huh? Look at how quickly I’ve mastered the art of speaking respectfully, like the true intellectual I am!

Filia’s father’s eyes widened in surprise. My perfect command of respectful language left him shocked, was my guess. “Partner?! I-I see...” He cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose there’s more and more to talk about then. Let’s go home. Your mother is waiting!”

“Yes, let’s. Oh, can I bring Yuri along too?” asked Filia.

Huh? Filia’s father gave me a little glare. Maybe he felt some kinda rivalry because of my muscles? But nah, it was hard to imagine that when he had such a slender body.

“Hm... Very well. Follow me.”

“Certainly, sir,” I replied.

Well, we’d sort it out. After assuring him that I totally got where he was coming from, we went over to the house where Filia was born and raised. There was a little nameplate that read “Windia” affixed to the front. Inside the cozy place, I sat down next to Filia. Across the table sat Filia’s mother and father. It was a bit of a long distance, that table.

Filia’s mother had collapsed to her knees the minute she saw Filia; she went over and hugged Filia tight, crying her eyes out. It took quite a

while for her to calm down. She must've been real worried.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Mother."

"It's all right, we're just glad that you're back! Right, Elgis?"

"Right. It's so good to see you here."

The two of them gazed at their daughter with true joy. I couldn't imagine that these were parents who would just stop talking to Filia altogether, but... That was what Filia had described, so that was what must've happened.

As for how Filia felt about it? I snuck a sideways glance at her face. She looked a little strained. Her mouth was still, but her eyes darted nervously around the room.

"So, who is this?" asked Filia's mother, turning toward me. She looked a lot like Filia, huh? Or, I suppose in this case, Filia resembled her mother. Either way, they seemed more like sisters than mother and daughter, what with the weird elf thing.

"This man is Lia's *partner*, apparently," groaned Elgis, like he had to squeeze the words out.

"Oh!" replied Filia's mother, a wide smile on her face. "Oh my, oh my, oh my!"

"Wait..." Filia gasped. "Hey, you two! It's not like that!" What in the world was going on now? Filia was getting redder and redder. "Jeez, Mother, come on! You gotta be kidding me."

"Yes, exactly, that's right!" Elgis exclaimed. "It's still far too early for our little Lia to think about dating! Oh, Lia, your father's heart was pounding out of his chest!"

That reaction—ohhh, they thought I was her partner in *that* way, huh? What a weird idea. Totally outta left field. It explained why her pops was glaring at me before, though.

Still, thanks to this misunderstanding, Filia opened up a bit more. She spoke respectfully as always, of course, but that was just her habit. Honestly, I had no basis on which to complain about how any family operated, what with the whole not really having one. This was surely one totally run-of-the-mill way for families to be, right?

"I'm sorry, Yuri," said Elgis. "I got carried away and jumped to the wrong conclusion in all that excitement. I shouldn't have been so rude

to you.”

“Oh my goodness,” said Filia’s mother, “I’m so sorry about my Elgis, Yuri. My husband is a bit of an idiot, I’m afraid.”

“Ha! Compared to Fira, here,” he gestured at his wife, “I certainly am an idiot. Fira’s the most brilliant person in the village, after all.”

“Hush, Elgis! You’re giving me too much credit!”

What was up with this sugary, lovey-dovey stuff? I felt a little outta place. Huh. Here I was feeling queasy, and I hadn’t even eaten any raw meat!

“By the way, Yuri,” added Fira, “you’re certainly very, ah, unique, aren’t you? Your body, I mean.”

“Oho, so you’ve noticed? My body is a meaty temple to my unwavering discipline. Please, gaze upon it to your heart’s content.” Her parents had quite the good eye, eh? I took off my jacket and released my muscles, flexing my arms to show off my large and well-developed biceps.

“Oh...”

“Goodness...”

Then I rolled my arms back and turned my hips to emphasize my triceps.

“Hm...”

“Gracious...”

Next, I put my hands behind my head and showed off my abs.

“Oh...”

“My...”

Then I put my arms on my waist, and—

“All right, that’s enough, please!” shouted Filia, flailing her arms. What, had I done something bad? “Don’t drag my parents into your weirdness! And you two, don’t look at Yuri with such deep interest. You’ll catch the stupid.”



What, like I'd infect them or something? No bacterium is half as muscled as me, and—hmp. "Stupid," huh? Not *this* intellectual muscle man.

"O-oh, I see, I'm sorry, Lia."

"Ah, yes, I suppose I got carried away too. My apologies."

I quietly got dressed. Just getting them a little bit interested was enough, I suppose. The seeds I'd sown would surely bloom into a fulsome flower of muscle. Just thinking about it made my heart skip a beat.

"What was Filia like as a child?" I asked, trying to dispel the awkward atmosphere. I'd only recently learned how to read a room lately, so to speak, so I figured I might as well give it a try.

"Well, now..." Elgis stroked his chin. It looked like he had some subtle whiskers, but no full beard.

"Elgis, let's tell him about that one time. You know, when she was three years old?" Fira grinned.

"Oh, that's right! Listen to this, Yuri: When Lia was three years old, she said, 'Daddy, I want to marry you!'"

Fira lightly smacked Elgis on the head. "Elgis, stop messing with our guest! Lia never once said anything like that."

"Sorry, sorry!" Elgis cleared his throat. "What we wanted to tell you about was the story of when Filia wet the bed."

Filia went white. "What?!"

But Elgis and Fira were smiling. They seemed to really want to share memories of their daughter.

"Okay, get a load of this," said Elgis. "When Lia was three years old, she came up with such a cute excuse for it. She told me, 'I-It just rained in my bed! I was so surprised!' Can you believe it?"

"Father?!"

"And here I was," said Fira, "thinking I'd given birth to an angel."

"Mother?!"

"Filia..." I said, "that's adorable."

"Y-Yuri, you too?!"

Wow, so there was a time when even Filia used childish excuses like that? She was completely red in the face from embarrassment, but I thought having memories of your family was a good thing. This was proof there'd been a time when they hadn't been cold to her, too, and that was good to know. But Filia didn't seem to agree.

"Now, Yuri, would you mind terribly if I erased your memory?" she asked.

"Um, yes, I definitely would?" Yeesh, talk about going from zero to terrifying, Filia!

Filia grinned sheepishly. "I didn't say that you'd lose everything from the moment you were born. Just, ah, you know, this present moment, maybe? Please?"

So she wanted me to just forget about it. I supposed she couldn't help it. "I didn't see or hear anything. How's that?"

"How's what?" said Filia through gritted teeth. "We aren't talking about *anything* at *all* right now."

I needed to completely forget for Filia's sake, eh? In order to really get the job done, I repeated it to myself over and over: "I don't know anything about Filia wetting the bed. I don't know anything about Filia wetting the bed. I don't know anything about Filia wetting the bed..."

"H-hey, wait! That's the opposite. If anything, you're cementing it in your memory! L-Look, the weather outside is so nice—please look at that!"

Weather...the weather, huh? "Weather...rain...wetting the bed."

"Agggh, darn it, never mind! Okay, just don't think about anything at all. Clear your mind!"

"Clear my mind...mind...wetting the bed."

"Agh, come on! That doesn't even—how would that even *lead* to—argh! What kind of thought process do you have where 'clearing your mind' leads to 'wetting the bed'?!"

Sadly, no matter what she said, the more that I tried not to think of The Incident, the more it just popped into my head. Humans really are mysterious creatures, aren't they?

Elgis and Fira looked from Filia to one another.

“Lia sure is cute, huh, Elgis?”

“Lia sure is just adorable, huh, Fira?”

Man, talk about doting parents!

Filia groaned. “Why did it come to this?”

“Filia,” I said, “your face is completely red.”

“You don’t need to point that out!” Filia shouted, but otherwise, her house was filled with the warm laughter of a happy family reunion.

Elgis and Filia continued boasting about their daughter, and then, before we knew it, it was nighttime. They offered to let me use the living room as a bedroom for the night. Of course, Filia would sleep in a separate room. It seemed like the three of them were all on the second floor.

“You’re so big, though. Are you going to be able to fit on the couch?” asked Fira.

“No worries, I’ll sleep standing up.”

“I-I see...” replied Fira. She looked from her daughter to me, concerned, but I remained motionless.

I was in someone else’s house, so I couldn’t do any kind of training that would make noise. For the time being, I decided I might as well try some flexibility exercises.

I’d do some careful stretching first. I stretched my joints in my arms and legs, one by one, to make sure there wasn’t any discomfort. (Some people take this way too lightly, but stretching can be a tough and time-consuming thing if you’re actually doing it right.) By the time I’d finished checking the condition of my body, it was already the middle of the night.

“Let’s see, what to do next?”

After racking my brain for a bit, I figured I’d guess to what degree I could spread my legs apart. I sat on the floor and spread ’em. Ninety degrees... 180 degrees... 270 degrees...

“Three-hundred is my limit, huh?”

Interesting. Ten degrees more than when I lived alone in the forest. Your body's flexibility affects your ability to fight, so being limber is always a good thing.

I was in a pretty good mood now. Around then, I heard someone's footsteps as they came down the stairs. I figured it was someone coming down for a drink of water, so I stayed completely still so I wouldn't startle them.

"Eek! What are you doing, Yuri?"

"Whaddya mean? Flexibility exercises. Ain't it obvious, Filia?"

This was the first time in five days that I'd seen Filia in her pajamas. The pink polka-dot designs somehow made her look more childish than usual. Maybe the story I'd heard this afternoon about her wetting the bed was still fresh in her mind, but that was no excuse for her to shriek the moment she saw me.

"This is kind of grotesque, don't you think?" she said, wincing down at my spread legs. "I mean, this isn't exactly the way a person is supposed to, uh, bend..."

"These are the fruits of my training."

"I see." Filia grabbed a cup and generated water in it with her water magic. She then brought the cup to her lips and gulped the clear water down quick, her thin, pale throat bobbing up and down as she drank. It felt weird not to say anything as I watched her, so I decided to impress upon her the significance of this training.

"If you think of the combat power of an ordinary person as 'one,' then the combat strength of that same person holding a knife or sword would be approximately 'five.' Consider, then: What would that same person's combat power be if they trained and strengthened their muscles? Right, Filia?"

Filia finished her cup, wiped her mouth, tilted her head to the side, and replied: "Who knows?"

"The answer is 'muscle.'"

"You've gone from quantitative to qualitative assessments there, Yuri."

Exactly. Muscle as a combat power can't be quantified with numbers. That's the *nature* of muscle. Pride in one's own physical strength itself is a type of confidence that can't be gained any other

way. It was impressive that she realized that!

“Sounds like you’ve got it pretty well figured out too, Filia! Have you perhaps been making an effort to train your muscles day and night—and hiding it from me?”

“I’ve got what figured out now? And why are you so happy about whatever this is?”

“It makes me so happy that I wanna do a little jump for joy!”

“You’re a lot sometimes,” said Filia with a gentle smile.

“So, uh... How is it being back at your house after all this time?”

“Better than I expected. I’m glad I could open up with my parents. I don’t know if I can stop speaking formally around them yet, though,” said Filia, and now her smile was broad.

“Just don’t force it and things’ll be fine.”

“As for my abilities...” she just shook her head. “Let’s talk about that a little later.”

Right, yeah. That was our original goal here: regaining Filia’s abilities. “Yeah. From how things looked today, everything seems okay. Just remember that I’m here too. No need to get worried.”

“I’m counting on you, then,” said Filia before walking back up the stairs. “Good night.”

“Night,” I replied as she walked off, opening my legs again. Ten more degrees was pretty good, but was it good *enough*?

Chapter 10: Aim the Ball at Your Opponent's Chest

THE NEXT DAY, I woke up before sunrise and trained as silently as possible until everyone else was awake. If I didn't at least try to contain my noise, I'd only be a nuisance. Showing consideration to others like this was exactly what made me a true gentle muscle man.

Not long after, I heard footsteps coming from upstairs—two pairs.

“Oh my, Yuri, you're up awfully early, aren't you?”

“You got up even earlier than us! What a respectable young man.”

It was Fira and Elgis. Fira started cooking breakfast while Elgis got out the plates. When Elgis finished getting things ready, he stood back to watch his wife cook.

“Ah, how on earth did I end up with such a perfect wife?”

“My goodness, honey, are you hoping to get something from complimenting me?”

“Ah, Yuri, what am I supposed to do? I love my wife so much I can hardly stand it.”

“H-huh...” Talk about lovey-dovey. I couldn't deal with this stuff at all. C'mon, when was Filia gonna get up?

“Good morning!” Thank goodness, my wish was granted. Filia let out a long yawn as she traipsed down the stairs. Oh, Filia, my savior!

Elgis and Fira's eyes widened when they saw Filia awake. Apparently the old Filia was a bit of a sleepyhead, so they were especially shocked. It certainly was true that back when we'd met, she'd woken up late, which had been pretty difficult to deal with on the road. Things had changed since those days.

“I still can't believe my Lia woke up early...” said Elgis, shaking his head. “You've grown up since we saw you last, haven't you? Yuri, is this your influence? No need to tell me—I'm so glad Lia is together with a proper young man like yourself.”

“Oh, I did nothing.”

“Yuri?” Filia replied breathlessly. “A *proper* young man? Is any of this real?”

Oh, this was real, all right. Of course there were people who understood my propriety and all that stuff!

After we finished our meal, Filia showed me around the village.

“There’s not much separation between houses, is there?” I noted.

I supposed there were a lot of dangers in the forest. The houses were probably kept so close together so people could group up right away if something happened. The village’s population numbered a whole eighty-two elves in Filia’s childhood, she said, but I got the impression even she thought that was small. From what I could see, there didn’t seem to be many places to play around either.

That didn’t necessarily mean things were shabby or something. The construction of the homes was impressively solid. It just seemed to be the way of elves not to embellish things more than necessary.

“Actually,” Filia said, “there’s a field the whole village uses, over there.”

“Can we see it?”

“Of course!”

Somehow, she seemed happy to introduce me to her hometown, and she just kept smiling brightly. I was a little relieved to see her so carefree. I mean, it wasn’t like all her memories of this place could be bad, right? I was sure she had some happy memories too.

I didn’t have much of any memory of my childhood, but seeing Filia’s smiling face made me feel like I was reliving some of her memories through her, vicariously. Then, suddenly, I came to a stop. I looked at my feet.

I was standing on a stone bridge that crossed a very, very small stream, only about as wide as my waist.

“Guh.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Filia, tilted her head to one side.

“We gotta hit that bridge when we come to it, right?”

“We gotta *what*? That makes no sense at all, Yuri. Oh, just look at me, *I’d* like a couple of horsetails to sprout from a thunderhead cloud. That’s how you sound.”

“I made more sense than that!”

Filia held her index fingers above her head like...horsetails? “So,” she said, wiggling her fingers, “what do you mean by wanting to ‘hit the bridge?’”

“It’s like, you know, the saying? ‘Hit that bridge when you come to it.’ Everyone knows that proverb.”

“That’s not a proverb. In fact, if *you* did that, it’d probably be a misdemeanor.”

Ohhh, I’d remembered the proverb wrong. At once, my desire to “hit the bridge” completely disappeared from my mind. What appeared in its place was a heart that cared for the bridge dearly—a heart that wanted to protect this tiny, necessary thing that worked so hard for the elves, no matter how many times it was trampled on. This little guy was truly a mirror of the good in people. I crouched down and rested my hand on the bridge, smiling gently at the touch of its tough, rugged surface.

“Hey, little guy,” I whispered to the bridge, “looks like you got some pretty good muscles there, don’t ya?”

“*Please* don’t run too far into your own little world today, Yuri.” Filia rubbed her temples. “Don’t talk too long to the bridge.”

“Filia, I’m going to tell you one important thing.” I held a finger straight up. “Conversation is like a game of catch, but with words instead of balls. Think about the other person. Have consideration for them. Engage them. That’s what matters in this wild, wild world.”

“Now that I understand, but why then do you end up in conversations like this? It really is strange. Yuri, sometimes you toss the ball *way* behind the other person, with all of your strength.”

But that—that wasn’t how to play catch! No, that couldn’t be true—not of a gentle, considerate muscle man like yours truly. I had to protest! “No, Filia, I’m always aiming at your chest—”

“What?! W-wait, Yuri, what you are saying? M-my...?! What a, s-strange thing to say...” Filia crossed her arms over her chest.

Err, huh? Okay, now I was starting to feel embarrassed, and I wished she’d stop. Jeez, how much of an overactive imagination did she have?

“R-really?!” Oh, right, Telepathy. “Well, I don’t care if you’re

embarrassed too! I'm much too cute to be swayed by that! B-besides, Yuri, you're always excessively self-conscious!"

Sure, Filia. Talk about the pot trying to burn the kettle's booty!

When we arrived at the field, we saw some elves tilling the soil. It would've been easier if they tilled using earth magic, but Filia said they tried to live by the labor of their bodies instead. Something about not letting magic upset the balance of the soil's magical energy, because only then could you harvest the best quality vegetables.

It was quite a refreshing sight to see the slender elves working the fields with hoes in hand. "There are only about eighty people in the village, but it looks like everyone takes turns."

"The village chief takes charge of it. When we reach a certain age, we're given certain responsibilities and take turns with jobs such as working the fields and patrolling the area. Sometimes, if you're *very* talented, you're given a job at a pretty early age. Like, say, the beautiful genius elf you're talking to." Filia flashed a refreshingly smug smile, complete with perfect white teeth.

Whoa, it actually felt great to hear her go on like that, even if it was narcissistic as anything. Calling yourself a genius wasn't easy. Impressive.

Filia waved to a man working out in the field. "So, dear Yuri, that guy over there might actually be *behind* me in terms of work history. My junior, even though he's older than me."

"Hm? Behind you? What's this about back muscles?"

"No, I said they're behind me. What's this about back muscles?"

"You haven't heard of 'em? Aw man, well, your latissimus dorsi —"

"No, I didn't mean to imply that I wanted to know about the latissimus dorsi. What I'm trying to say is, how in the *world* did you mistake 'behind me' for 'back muscles'?"

"I was just thinking about it, that's all. Ya know, the latissimus dorsi is extremely interesting. It's just been on my mind. It happens,

right?”

“Your experiences are not universal, Yuri,” said Filia with a long, dumbfounded look.

C’mon, I was the dumbfounded one! I let out a deep sigh, slumped my shoulders, and shook my head. “Filia, you really should use your head a little more often.”

“I obviously am!”

And yet she didn’t think about muscles? That seemed unlikely, to be honest.

Filia looked unconvinced. “For crying out loud, I—okay. First of all, you must think of things other than muscles, right, Yuri? Ever?”

Things other than muscles? Uhhhh.

As I pondered what she meant, Filia nervously explained. “You know, like have you thought about—you know, just as an example—a beautiful girl with long, silver hair and a slender body? Or, perhaps...a flawless adventurer with a mastery of wind magic? Or maybe the *overwhelmingly* beautiful elf girl standing *right* in front of you at this *very* moment?”

“Uh, aren’t those all just you?”

“Huh? W-well, now that you mention it, I suppose they are. Why, I hadn’t even noticed. Astonishing!”

What was with that reaction? Was she really pretending that was an accident?

“Okay, so then...” Filia paused. “Do you? Think about me? And stuff?”

“Well, yeah, course I do. We’re partners. How could I not?” It was impossible to be together with someone twenty-four hours a day and not think of them at all, you know?

“Oh, just as I expected from you, good Yuri! And would you look at that—your likeability meter has shot way, way up!” Filia held her flattened out palm to just about her eye level to demonstrate.

Wait a minute, so just by thinking, my likeability went up? Jeez, that was *way* too simple-minded. Now she was starting to worry me.

“With that settled... *When* do you think about me? Come on, come on, tell me!” said Filia, poking me with her elbow. What was the deal

with this excitement?

“Uh, well, I guess the time I thought about you the most was late a few nights ago, in the middle of the night.”

“Huh?!” Filia gasped. “I-In the middle of the night? Goodness, that’s, um...what were you thinking about?”

She sounded so hesitant to ask for some reason, but I replied anyway. “When you rolled over while you were sleeping, I just happened to catch sight of your belly. It stuck out in my mind, you know? Because, well, you just don’t got any abs at all.”

“And just like that, the likeability meter takes a sudden nosedive.”

“Huh?! What, why? What the heck just happened?!” Her palm was now flat on the ground! Had my likeability hit rock bottom?

“There’s no mystery to it,” said Filia with wise resignation. “It’s just a natural consequence.”

“I don’t get it...” Then again, that’s Filia for you. “By the way, is it okay if I go and help out?” I asked, pointing toward the elven folk working in the field.

“Oh? You’d like to help?”

“Yeah.” It looked like the elves had been using magical energy to strengthen their bodies, but it was plain as day to see they weren’t making much progress since their bodies were so dainty to begin with. If I could lend a hand, I’d surely prove useful.

“You don’t need to do that, Yuri. This is my birthplace. You have no ties to this village, and yet...”

Yeah, I might not have offered under normal circumstances, and it didn’t seem like this level of exercise would be good training for me, but things were different now. “I’m associated with you. If I make myself useful, it might change the way the village chief or whatever sees you a little. Something like this might be small, but if we keep doing this kind of thing, it’ll help us later on, probably. It’s like muscle trainin’, but with people.”

Not that it was gonna be that easy, but this was the least I could do. Just like Filia had said, I guess I *was* thinking about her.

“Yuri... Yuri?”

“Hm?”

When I looked at her, Filia was stretching tall, her legs wobbling as she stood on her tiptoes, her hands raised up high toward the heavens. “The likeability meter has skyrocketed.”

Seriously, talk about the pendulum swinging the other way. It’s certainly nice to have your partner like you, but what had I done to make my likeability just shoot up like that?

Eh, whatever. I released my muscles, headed out to the field, and—oh, hey, was that it? The very thought of me getting these muscles moving had captivated her! Totally understandable. My muscles even captivated me.

“Yuri, I get the feeling you’ve got the completely wrong idea again, but... Well, whatever, it’s fine. Let’s go over and help.”

“All right.”

Filia and I met with the elves in the field and started tilling. We finished working the soil in no time at all, mainly thanks to me.

“You were a great help, Mister...uhh...”

“Just Yuri.”

“Thank you, Yuri!”

“Oh, I just wanted to do something for Filia. If you want to be grateful, thank her,” I replied.

The elves turned toward Filia. “I see. Thank you, Filia.”

“Oh, no, no, I wasn’t very helpful myself.”

From there, we had a little small talk. Just like Filia had said, it seemed the elves hardly had any contact at all with the outside world. They seemed honestly surprised at everything I said.

“To be perfectly honest,” one of the workers admitted, “I’ve never met a human before, so I didn’t know what it would be like. You’re surprisingly normal.”

Another nodded. “We never would’ve known if Filia hadn’t brought him to us.”

“More reasons to thank Filia, if you ask me.”

No one seemed to care that Filia had left the village. On the contrary, everyone seemed grateful. I could only pray that this kindness would stick around even after Filia said she wanted to regain her

abilities.

After we finished helping out, we went over to greet the village chief, Elfeit. It was just before noon, a good time to visit.

Filia sighed. "I'd prefer not to see him..."

"We both know that's not an option, right?" He was the village chief, so (of course) he was the most important person in the village. This was a small little town, so it probably wouldn't be a good idea to just wander around without introducing ourselves.

"I know. I've just always been bad at dealing with the village chief, after...all that mess. And with me leaving like I did, so selfishly, I... What if he's angry?" Filia hunched over as she walked. The closer she got to the village chief's home, the shorter and shorter her stride became. It seemed like he was a major source of trauma for her, so I could understand why it weighed on her.

But you couldn't just admit defeat before you even fought. Sure, we'd been working toward getting her abilities back this whole time, but now it felt like we were getting down to brass tacks. We couldn't just accept defeat!

"Filia, you gotta get fired up. You're strong now. Right?"

"Yes." She took a breath. "You're right. I'll, um...I'll do my best!"

When we reached the village chief's house, Filia clenched her fists, summoned her courage, took another deep breath, and knocked on the door.

After some time passed, an elf appeared from inside the house. His ears were noticeably longer than the other elves'. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and he was (of course) pretty good-looking. He wore a long white robe that nearly touched the ground. I could sense his strength; power emanated from his entire body. Yeah, this had to be the village chief, no doubt.

After studying us and confirming our identities, he simply said, "Come in."

We obeyed. The entrance room, which seemed about the same

size as Filia's house, was pretty sparse aside from the bare essentials.

Elfeit sat down on a chair and glanced over to me briefly before speaking. "It's good that you've returned, but I never imagined you'd bring a human with you. Is this fellow your spouse?"

"N-no, it's not like that."

"Hmm... That's all right, then. Now that you're back, what's your plan? Are you going to live here?"

"Um, no. I'm just visiting for a short time, then I'll be traveling again."

Elfeit's expression chilled. A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows, and he glared at Filia like an investigator grilling a suspect. "In that case, why did you return? You, who abandoned this village. You, who selfishly left of your own accord."

Even though Elfeit emanated an air of intimidation that could scare off a monster, Filia was unfazed. She'd dealt with mortal danger countless times since traveling with me. Some half-hearted bullying wasn't enough to frighten Filia anymore.

Still, I guess Filia hadn't gotten her feelings in order enough to outright ask about her abilities yet, because she brought up something else instead. "Apparently, some 'Sinmarch' fellow named Misery Mosery is going about hunting elves. I came back because I thought I needed to warn you all. He's an extremely dangerous person who has already killed several of our kind."

Well, that wasn't *not* the reason we were here. That nearby village had warned us about the guy after all, and if, by some chance, he came to know about this village? He'd definitely attack. Just knowing he might be around could make a world of difference for the elves. And if the village chief was the head honcho around here, then the value of this information would be painfully obvious.

"I'm...grateful to you for providing me with this information. We'll need to increase our security immediately." Although Elfeit had a pained expression, he was already thinking about countermeasures. It seemed he was quite capable as chief. "Is that all, then? If so, go home. Elgis and Fira have been devastated since you left, you know. It would be a good for you to spend time with them."

"Yes," said Filia. "If you'll please excuse me..."

And Filia and I stepped out, leaving Elfeit behind.

“I-I was so nervous...” As soon as we left the house, Filia just deflated like a torn ball. The whole ordeal had really worn down her spirit.

“He seems strong. I wanna fight ’im.”

“Yuri, come now! If you do that, I’ll never get my abilities back! Just—bear with it!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I will.”

If Filia could get her abilities back, then she could become stronger. And if that happened, I could train myself and have Filia hit me with even stronger magic on the regular! It’d be pretty disappointing to miss out on that chance just by getting in a fight with Elfeit. Besides, Filia needed to protect herself from people like that Sinmarch guy, so we couldn’t lose a chance to return her to full strength.

So I was just gonna bear with it! Do whatever I had to do, just, come on, *bear with it*, Yuri.

“Umm?! Wh-why do you look like a demon, Yuri...?”

“Because I’m fighting my own *inner* demons right now...”

Still wanting very badly to punch Elfeit one to two thousand times, I went back to Filia’s parents’ house with my partner.

Chapter 11: Parental Love

BACK AT FILIA'S HOME, we had lunch together with Elgis and Fira.

After we finished cleaning up, Fira came back to the table and smiled at me.

“Thank you for helping me pick up the dishes, Yuri.”

Huh? All I'd done was carry my own share of tableware. I could've done way more, honestly. I was about to say “Pssh, ain't nothin.” Then I hesitated. Whew, close call. I had to keep talking respectful-like.

“Oh no, thank you, you're far too kind.”

“Yuri,” said Fira knowingly, “you don't have to strain yourself, you know? You don't need to be so humble either. It sounds like you're a little unaccustomed to speaking this way.”

Wait, how did she know I wasn't used to it? Did she have the same Telepathy ability as Filia?!

Filia gave me a look. “You don't need to read minds to see that.”

Was I that obvious? I'd thought I was improving, but finding the right words could be so difficult.

“Besides,” Fira continued, “you're Lia's partner, right? In that case, you don't need to be so reserved.”

“All right. In that case, I'll gladly accept your offer—thanks.” Speaking formally isn't supposed to make whoever you're speaking to feel uncomfortable. If the two of them preferred I just be myself, then I supposed it was fine.

“Now that we're all finished with lunch,” said Fira, “are you two going out again? Lia, Yuri?”

Filia shook her head. “No, I'd like to talk with you both for a short while.”

It was probably important to take some time and talk with her parents so she could really open up and speak frankly about her abilities. Also, it's just important for a family to make time for

conversation, you know?

I asked Filia “Is it okay for me to stick around?” with my eyes, and she nodded “Yes.” I’d assumed it’d be better if this remained just between them as a family, but apparently that was all me worrying too much.

“You’d like to...talk. May I ask, then—if that’s all right,” said Fira carefully, “what’s outside of the woods? We know so little about it.”

“Okay. Hmm...” Filia nodded. “I suppose I’ll start from the point when I met Yuri.” She turned to me suddenly and whispered in a low voice, “Leave it to me, Yuri: I’ll clear your name for you!”

“Hey, wait a minute, when did my name need clearin’ exactly?” That didn’t sound right at all!

But Filia didn’t listen to my appeal and got right into telling her tale.

She mainly spoke about her journey with me. I was under the impression that she’d been in a real spot, just wandering around aimlessly before we met, so maybe there wasn’t much to say about what had happened before. She talked about registering with the guild, the fight with the Grim Reaper, the magic battle tournament. She also gave an impassioned speech about the deliciousness of Slime Jelly. Whoa, that had really been a milestone for her, huh?

Still, she was probably trying not to worry her parents. I mean, she didn’t even bring up being kidnapped. Finally, the topic of the conversation gradually shifted toward more and more recent events.

“Oh, and listen to this: Yuri defeated a majin.”

“A majin?! Th-that’s incredible...” Her parents looked even more shocked when they heard that. So even elves who lived deep in the forest knew about the strength of majin, and I still hadn’t? Ugh.

“My goodness, Yuri, what is the secret of your strength?”

“Daily training to develop stronger muscles. For example...” I raised my fist up in the air—then smashed it into my own face as hard as I could. SMACK! A dull sound echoed throughout the room.

Filia sighed. “Well, that’s that. Yuri’s finally lost it.”

“Nope. This is a totally unique training exercise of my own design. I punch myself. See, that way I can both punch and *be* punched at the

same time! Brilliant, huh?”

“You said, with a twinkle in your eye. Mother, Father, I know you’re speechless and, yes, I am afraid he is just like this.”

C’mon, it was a huge time-saver of a technique! But apparently, the excellence of this method wasn’t quite getting across to them.

“Maybe it’s the passage of time,” I mused. “Elves and humans just see time differently, huh? If you were humans, the minute you learned about this technique, you’d probably all start smacking yourselves and shedding tears of joy, huh?”

“Yuri, that sounds—quite frankly—horrifying.”

Good grief. Ah, Filia, saying such odd stuff all the time! I mean, who wouldn’t want to see a training session?

“Let’s get back to the story,” said Filia, grabbing her drink. But just as she was about to take a sip, the wooden cup slipped from her hand and clattered to the ground, spilling the water across her clothes and onto the floor.

“Gyhhh!” Filia cried, trembling. “O-oh no, now I’ve done it…”

Fira shook her head. “Come now, dear, you were just being a little scatterbrained. I’ll clean up. Why don’t you go upstairs and change?”

“Th-thank you, Mother. I will,” replied Filia, heading upstairs.

Elgis and Fira forced a small chuckle.

“She’s the same as always, isn’t she?” said Elgis.

“It’s a bit of a relief, really,” said Fira.

“Did Filia used to be that scatterbrained?”

“Oh, yes. She’s always been proper, but she can be so absentminded sometimes.”

Filia’s parents really knew her well. Even though Filia had this incredible air of competence, along with a beautiful face and a gentle demeanor, in reality, she could be pretty clumsy. But, well, her parents’ expressions were tinged with seriousness now.

“Lia looked like she was having so much fun. Thank you, Yuri,” said Elgis.

“We really—well, I believe we really hurt that girl. So Yuri, thank you for saving her,” said Fira.

Both of them bowed deeply toward me. Wait, what was going on?

“I dunno what you’re talking about. I don’t remember doing anything like that for Filia.”

“You rescued her when she lost her path, and, well, we never thought we’d get the chance to talk to Lia again, after how deeply we hurt her. We’re truly grateful.”

They’d hurt Filia? When—oh, they were talking about when their behavior changed back then, right? It just seemed so weirdly impossible now, though. Both yesterday and today, I had only seen Elgis and Fira as sweet, good parents. Even I, a stranger, could see they loved their daughter. Had their faith in the Almighty Wind God really driven them to be so cruel?

“Why did you treat Filia coldly?” I asked. “Filia told me it was because you believed so strongly in the Almighty Wind God, but...was that really it?”

“My faith isn’t... I’m not *deeply* religious, but I didn’t have the courage to stand up to the village.” Elgis bit his lip and looked at the floor.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Belief in the Almighty Wind God has been fading in this village for some time. These days, the only person with a truly deep devotion is the village chief. It is said that for generations, the blood of the Wind God has flowed in the veins of his family. His authority is so great that if you dare defy him...you can no longer live in the village.”

Yeah, I was starting to get the picture here. “You followed the village chief’s orders, then. Rather than go against his wishes, you just...ignored Filia. That’s what happened?”

“That’s exactly right.”

So maybe Filia’s inability to read her parents’ minds wasn’t because they were disgusted by her, but because they’d closed off their minds to her from sheer guilt?

Elgis looked overwhelmed by sorrow and anguish. “I can say these things all I want, I suppose—say that if we’d disobeyed the chief, we might have still put Filia’s life in danger for violating his decree. But no matter what I say, we did something terrible to our girl.”

“You did. When Filia told me about her past, she was shaking and

crying...”

At that, the two went completely still, like time had come to a halt.

“But the smile she’s had since we got here...it’s real,” I said. “I can tell.”

It wasn’t like *I* could read minds or anything. If anything, I was pretty awful at guessing how other people felt. But Filia and I had been traveling together long enough that I think I knew Filia’s feelings better than most.

When we first arrived, I had sensed Filia feeling somewhat timid toward her parents, but that was hardly the case now. This was just my opinion, but it seemed Filia was beginning to open up to them again.

I continued as her parents listened in silence. “You two are the only parents Filia has, and now you’ve been given the chance to make amends. Isn’t it up to you to use that chance?”

Okay, sure, I didn’t have parents, and I didn’t quite grasp stuff like caring for your family. It was hard for me to get it. But when I looked at how Filia had been since we got to the village, I somehow felt like maybe I *did* get it. Here, Filia was a kid again, a kid who adored her parents.

“Filia’s definitely expecting a lot from you two. She’s probably thinking: ‘Maybe I can bring them to my side this time.’ I’d like it if you didn’t betray her expectations. She might be your beloved daughter, but she’s also my beloved partner.”

I hit them with my real feelings. When it came to how I felt about Filia, I wasn’t gonna lose. But this was a family affair, and I couldn’t just rant about how I felt. The rest was for the three of them to talk about. Saying anything more would just be insensitive.

I’d been sitting up straight, but now I leaned in close. “I’m sure Filia will probably talk to you about this stuff sooner or later. Until then, it’s probably a good idea to keep carrying on like normal. Oh, and for now, I think I’ll just say that it’s probably better not to let the mood get dark. I’m sure you know this since you’re her parents, but she’s sensitive to that kind of thing.”

“I’m...really glad you’re our daughter’s partner, Yuri. Thank you.”

“We will have to talk to our daughter directly about this,

properly.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Probably better to talk to Filia directly, straight out.”

Yep, I really felt like I understood where they were coming from now. Good talk.

Filia ran back down the stairs, having just changed clothes. “What were you talking about? Wait—don’t tell me. Was Yuri hitting on Mother, by chance?”

Was I *what*?

“What?!” Elgis gasped. “Yuri, I won’t forgive you for this! Not only are you after Lia, but Fira too?!”

Wait, why did he fall for that?! He’d been talking with me the whole time!

Fira got in on the goof and drew closer to me. “Oh, but maybe I’ll be swayed by Yuri?”

“Waahhhh!” Elgis...shouted? Said? I wasn’t sure how to even describe a guy pretending to cry.

“I kid, I kid, honey! Elgis is the only husband for me!”

“Fira!” The two of them shared a passionate embrace. What exactly was going on here? And how had this happened?

Wait. Was this just how they normally acted? Were they secretly just as awkward as Filia? I squinted at Filia, wondering if she found this weird, but she was happily gazing at them as they embraced.

“Mother, Father, you’ve always been so close. Someday I want to have a marriage like that.”

This was *normal*?

“Elgiis!” cried Fira.

“Firaaa!” cried Elgis.

Huh. Guess this was a standard to aspire to, eh? More wisdom of the world for Yuri!

Now that Filia was back, the conversation returned to what she’d seen outside the forest. It seemed like Filia just wanted to keep on talking about one thing after another, so her mouth never stopped moving.

“Oh, and then! Yuri—”

“Hey, Lia? I think I’d like to hear about more than just you running around with your sweetheart,” said Fira.

“M-my—my *sweetheart*? He’s no such thing! I’m only talking about Yuri because I have extremely few friends!”

(Uh, that wasn’t the comeback Filia thought it was.)

“Why don’t you tell us what’s been going on with yourself, Lia?”

“Hmm, well, it’s a little embarrassing to go on and on about myself, don’t you think?” said Filia, blushing a little. Jeez, she could get so bashful for a narcissist.

Elgis turned to me instead. “How about we hear from you, Yuri? What do you think of Lia, eh? What’s she like, from your perspective?”

What did Filia look like to me, huh? Once again, it was hard to put into words. “Let’s see... I think she’s kind and considerate. When I was fighting with the majin—remember when Filia mentioned that?—I lost one of my arms. Filia healed it back. Normally she messes around a lot, but she’s super serious and really cool when she’s casting recovery magic.”

I was in front of her parents, so I thought it’d be a good idea to pick up the slack for her a little. That kind of care for others was what made me a true gentle muscle man, after all.

“J-jeez, Yuri! You’re going too far!” said Filia happily, lightly smacking me on the shoulder.

“Oh, and then, she also said somethin’ to me like, what was it? ‘You can lick the bottom of my foot—’”

“Whaaaaaa?! J-jeez, Yuri, that’s too far! Again! But...but *bad!*” said Filia, repeatedly smacking my shoulder in a panic.

Sorry, that just slipped out! Not the greatest thing say in front of her parents, huh? But when I looked over at Elgis and Fira, they were leaning forward attentively.

“Now, Yuri...” said Elgis, “did you lick it?”

Did I...uh...*what*? “Uh, no, of course not.”

“Eh he he. Still a novice, Yuri. If I were in your shoes, young man, I would lick it without a second thought.”

“What?!” Filia cringed out of her skin. “Father!”

“I understand Elgis,” said Fira, nodding sagely. “I’d lick it too.”

“Hey, wait a minute, Mother?!”

Filia’s family was nuts. Or maybe...maybe this was what a family just did?

Nooope, don’t think so. It was all so much that Filia just kind of froze.

“It’s so nice to be doted on, isn’t it?” I said.

“Is this doting?” Filia said with a groan. “Does this count as doting?”

Why was she asking me? I had no idea!

Chapter 12: Bomb Disposal Squad

IT WAS WELL PAST NOON, around the time for children to be put down for a nap. Elgis and Filia had gone off to the village chief's place, so Filia and I were scouting the forest. There was a chance Misery Mosery had already learned the elf village was here, so we thought it wasn't a bad idea to look around.

If I was being honest, though, I really just wanted to fight some monsters. Also, as we were completely surrounded, 360 degrees, by Doon Trees, I doubted the monsters could detect us even if we had a little conversation. As such, as we walked, I talked to Filia about the essence of muscle.

"Listen up: When you write the words 'man' and 'dream' together, you know what that spells? Muscle."

"It absolutely does not, no."

"In other words, it's an old saying that means 'All humanity instinctively dreams of training muscles.'"

"Nope, still wrong."

"That's why I have to spread the word of the splendor of muscle throughout the world!"

"Are you listening to me? Yuuuuri?"

"Come on, relax, Filia. Now, what do you get when you read 'muscle' backwards? E-L-C-S-U-M...elcsum. Sounds like the word 'elk' and the word 'some.' Get it?"

"What am I supposed to be getting here?"

What in the world? She couldn't understand it, even with my splendid explanations? Well, guess there was no getting around it. I had to jump in and explain it more in depth, huh? I rolled up my sleeves and tried once more.

"Now, Filia, listen carefully: What do you get when you read 'elcsum' backwards?"

At that, Filia gestured like she was deep in thought. Good! She just had to think it over, nice and slow. You couldn't reach the essence of muscle if you just spent your days all in a daze or something.

"What do you get?" Filia repeated. "It was 'muscle' backwards to begin with, so obviously it's just going to be muscle, isn't it?"

I gave her a thumbs up. "Exactly. That's why muscles are amazin'."

"It's 'amazing' how many of my brain cells your lectures murder."

"Let's spread the word about the glory of muscles together, Filia!"

"I'm not going to 'spread the word' about the glory of muscles! Absolutely not!"

"I see. You have truly trained long and hard to achieve such pure tsundere energy."

"Wrong! Ab-so-lute-ly wrong!"

Hmm. Why wasn't she getting the message of muscle? Maybe if I repeated it? Repeating the same words can deepen the impression those words leave. That's a high-level muscle-training technique.

"Muscles are great, muscles are great, muscles are great. I repeated it twice because it's important, okay?"

"That was *three* times, Yuri."

"Err...I repeated myself three times! Three times! *Three* times!"

"I'm terribly sorry for trying to drown out whatever you were trying to say earlier, whatever nonsense that was, but don't you think if you have *too* much impact, it'll be overwhelming and I simply won't remember? It's honestly been a long time since you've been this level of...Yuri."

"Ah, but Filia, some things just can't be forgotten. Why? Because every word out of my mouth, I speak to my muscles..."

"Can you please stop saying such absurd things with such a meditative look on your face? It's bizarre!"

I'd astonished her without even trying—heck yeah! Or wait, heck *no*. I had to be humble. Because it's all, after all, about the muscles. Humility is one of the great, essential powers of muscle!

"Whenever you open your mouth, Yuri, I wonder if I've gone craz

—eek! Watch out!”

I stopped in place and whirled around, but I didn’t see anything that looked like a dangerous enemy. “Filia, what’s up? Maybe your eyes are playing tricks?”

“No, look there, right there.”

Filia pointed to three spherical things growing out of the ground. They were mostly green, though they had jagged white stripes that looked like lightning bolts. They were just randomly sitting on the ground. Were they a type of plant or something? They didn’t really look dangerous at first glance. Filia carefully studied them before nodding.

“This plant, it’s a myopamyopamyoropyo.”

“Myopameowmeow what now?”

“Myopamyopamyoropyo. Or otherwise known as a myopamyopa, for short.”

That sounded like the kind of name that only showed up in a tongue twister or something. Wow. Talk about a sad existence for these little guys. I’d already forgotten all those syllables.

“Name aside, what’s so dangerous about this thing?”

“The plant might appear normal, but it’s actually quite dangerous. The minute you touch the white part, it’ll cause a huge explosion, and—Yuri? Yuri, why are you reaching toward the myopamyopa?”

What a silly question. “You said ‘huge explosion’! Do you expect me *not* to touch it?!”

“Please don’t move, Yuri. If you move now, I’ll get caught up in the blast too, okay? Yuri? Hey, Yuri, I’m begging you. Just wait a minute, and—”

“Sorry, Filia. I can’t take it anymore.”

Unable to control my urge to explode, I touched the white part of the meow-meow-bean. The second I did, the monopoly-man-thing emitted bright, dazzling light.

“Oh my God, Yuri, you idiooot!”

And as Filia cried out her agonizing death throes, the my-little-pony-melon exploded. The sudden pulsing blast wave did get me slightly excited, but, enh. It wasn’t very powerful. When the dust cloud subsided, I analyzed the explosion.

“Really? Aww, that ain’t much of anything. Well, guess it might be dangerous if it just goes off unexpectedly,” I said.

“Ugh... That was horrible.” Filia blinked her eyes blearily. But there was a bigger change: her hair.

“Whoa, your hair is, like, double the size. How’d that happen?”

“What do you mean, how?! The explosion! You exploded everything, and now my hair’s a mess!”

“I don’t know. I think it suits you. Looks kind of wild.” I smirked.

Filia just stared back at me with scornful eyes. “Do you seriously think you can just butter me up now and that’ll make everything okay?”

“Hold on, I’m not done yet.”

“It’s not going to work, Yuri.”

Yeah? In that case, the best thing would be to just apologize honestly. “Sorry, Filia. I just couldn’t hold it in anymore.”

“Well, okay,” she pouted. “But if you do it again, I’ll get mad,” she added, and whirled around in a huff.

“Okay. I’ll bear with it after I do it just two more times.”

“Two *more* times? Why are you so motivated to do this?! Ah, come on, Yuri, just—can we not—do you have to—EEEEK!”

Two more explosions went off in succession. It wasn’t so bad, if I do say so myself.

A short time later, we were on our way back to the village with our search complete.

“I really, really will get *actually* angry with you for *real* if you try something like that again,” Filia snapped. “Sheesh...”

She’d already said that before forgiving me basically right away. Was she being kind or naïve? I guess she was just being Filia.

“Sorry.”

“Ugh, now my hair’s all disheveled,” pouted Filia as she walked beside me.

“Can’t you just use water magic to wash it, then wind magic to dry it?”

“Hmm... You’re smart, Yuri. I’ll do that.”

Apparently, Filia had never tried that before. She created a mass of water over head, and then began to lower it down little by little. Then she began to wash her hair. Filia’s hair, which had turned ashen from all the dust and smoke, immediately regained its brilliant silver shine. With a little wind magic to dry, her hair was back to its original beauty. After checking her work, Filia turned to me with a big smile.

“All good?” I asked.

“Yes! Thanks to you, Yuri, I—” Filia blinked. “Wait, this is your fault to begin with, isn’t it?! Ugh, not good, not good! You almost fooled me...”

It’s not like I’d meant to fool her. More like she’d kinda fooled herself. Anyway, we saw another one of those muddy-muppet-ball whatevers from before growing out of the ground as we continued, right in the middle of our path. If we kept going, we’d end up stepping on it, probably hitting the white part and causing an explosion.

With Filia finally back in a good mood, I couldn’t stand watching it get wrecked again. Yeah, we could just pass this one by. I’d already had enough fun with the last three, after all. Or so I told myself. But man, resisting was hard. I had to respect myself for such puissant powers of prudence.

“Filia,” I said, “be careful, watch out for that explodey plant.”

“Ugh, there’s another one? We need to be really, really, really careful not to step on—gah!”

Filia, too preoccupied with paying attention, lost her footing. She tripped over her own feet and tumbled magnificently—toward the myopic-moose-berry. Worse yet, she fell smack-dab onto the white part of the mayo-myco-meep-meep. Worst of all, well, we experienced yet another explosion.

Thus, Filia once again used water and wind magic to clean and dry her hair. With her hair cleaned, she poked my arm with her index finger while she averted her eyes from mine. “J-jeez. Yuri, this happened because you’re such a goof.”

“Hey, don’t try and pin this on me!” Really, what was even the

point of trying to blame me in this situation?

“Because I never give up, Yuri,” she said dramatically. “Not unless my chances are at zero percent.”

“Uh. I *guess* that’s good advice for the most part, but...”

When coming from the mouth of Filia, it sounded more about self-preservation. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“So, how d’ya feel?” I asked nonchalantly. “Any better?”

Filia looked at me blankly for a minute, then her eyes widened. “You—wait, don’t tell me, Yuri, you did this for me on purpose because I’ve been brooding?”

“Nah, complete afterthought on my part. I only thought to ask just now.”

It *did* seem possible that subconsciously I’d thought the explosion might put her at ease. It wasn’t like I’d purposefully made things explode for that reason, though. As if I was even capable of paying that much attention to detail!

“Huh. Jeez, don’t let me get my hopes up like that.” Filia chuckled like she was a little exasperated. “But, you know, your...Yuri-ness did cheer me up a bit. I was definitely feeling a lot of pressure about opening up to my parents, so, thank you,” she finished, bowing lightly.

“Filia, you’ve got this weird tendency to take things way too seriously. You should really remember that sometimes it’s better to just think of it like we’re messing around and say something like ‘Duhhh, I dunno.’ Normal Filia stuff!”

“Pardon me? ‘Duhhh, I dunno’?! A perfect and beautiful elf would say no such thing!”

“Pfft.”

“Please don’t snort.”

We looked at one another for a moment...and cracked up. When the laughter finally died down, Filia looked at me seriously and said, “Yuri, I’ve made up my mind.”

“Hm? About what?”

“I’m going to talk to them tonight about getting my abilities back,” announced Filia, determination in her eyes.

“I see.”

“Yes.”

“You want me to stick around?”

“No. They’re my powers, and I want to convey my own feelings. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Okay.” Well, I’d already told Elgis and Fira what I wanted to say, so there wasn’t really anything more I could add. Besides, Filia was finally motivated. It was my job as her partner to support her, right here and right now. I lightly patted Filia on the back. “Do your best, Filia.”

“I’ll flex my do-my-best muscle!” said Filia, beaming. “Eh he he, just kidding.”

“Huh? What was that? Gross...”

“*Gross?* How is that gross? Ugh, mean old Yuri!”

Filia and I bantered on all the way back to the house.

Chapter 13: Filia's Resolve

(Filia's POV)

MOTHER AND FATHER sat across from me. I had just finished eating dinner and still sat at the table with them, but Yuri wasn't beside me. It had to be like that, though. I mean, if I couldn't open up to my parents about my abilities, I would never be able to continue on my journey.

"Father. Mother." I spoke slowly, trying to calm my racing mind. My heart thudded in my chest, but...I needed to say something. I *had* to say something. That was why I'd returned to the village. "I have something I would like to ask of you. No, I gotta ask."

If I spoke so stiffly and unnaturally, I'd never reach them. I stopped using such formal language, and...went back to how I used to talk, before I was ignored. The two of them listened with serious faces. I guess they could tell I was about to be truly earnest. I forced my lips to stop quivering through sheer willpower and opened my mouth:

"I came back to the village to get my abilities back. Fa—Dad. Mom? I want you guys to come with me to help me convince the village chief."

Their eyes widened in surprise, just like I'd expected. I'd said something rather astounding right out of the blue.

"Your abilities?!" Mom started.

"Lia, the village chief says the 'Wind God' ability is an affront to Almighty Wind God—"

"Even so!" I shouted, interrupting them. "Even so," I repeated firmly, "I need them. 'Wind God,' and 'Clairvoyance' too."

At that, my dad let out a small sigh. "To be frank, I had a sneaking suspicion this was the reason you came back. Your mother and I, we would *like* to...to...but we can't. Please understand, Lia, we want you to be happy."

Oh. So my own dad disagreed with me. "How is taking away my

abilities supposed to make me happy?”

“Because when you have power, you get caught up in dangerous things. Rather than have a pointlessly strong ability, wouldn’t it be better to not have it at all?”

“No, Dad. That’s not even true!” I fired back.

Fired back? Huh. Looking back, that might’ve been the first time I’d ever argued with my dad directly. I considered taking a peek into their minds, too, but—no, it still didn’t work. When they’d found out that I had the ‘Wind God’ ability, ever since they started ignoring me, I hadn’t been able to see into their hearts.

My Telepathy only allowed me to read the minds of those whose minds were open to me. If I couldn’t read their minds, then their minds were closed. As nice as they’d been acting after I returned to the village, did they... Did they really hate me deep down, after all? If I got the Wind God back, would they ignore me again? Would they stop talking to me? Ugh, I...I could barely think about it. It felt like my heart was trembling in my ribs, on the verge of shattering and cutting up my insides.

“Now, Elgis, she...”

“Fira, you be quiet,” he said. “Filia...I’m not in favor of getting your abilities back.”

Dad only ever called me “Filia” when he was being serious. It was almost nostalgic, hearing that after such a long time, but it was all soured with his distrust.

“Dad, are you even thinking of me when you say that?” No. No, they weren’t at all. They were thinking of themselves, of their cozy little lives in the village, of how scared they were of being ostracized. I wanted to spit the words at them, but I managed to swallow that venom.

“Of course we are,” said Dad. “Isn’t it obvious? Oh, Filia, you’ve always been the most important thing to your mother and me! I’d give my life for you!”

“Yes, Filia...there’s...there’s nothing in this world that matters to us more than you!”

I mattered to them more than anything, huh? But for all that, they didn’t want to return my abilities after all. My thoughts weren’t

reaching them. To be honest, it was...it was hard not to cry. They'd both been so kind to me since I returned that I'd really believed they might understand. Really begun to hope, you know? But that bright hope collapsed into a black hole of disappointment.

"That's exactly why your mother and I are opposed to you getting your abilities back," my father said adamantly. I supposed I couldn't change his feelings on the matter so soon or so easily.

Well, fine. No getting around it. I hadn't wanted to worry them, so I'd kept quiet about it, but if things were going to end like this? I wasn't going to hide the truth of my motives. I'd just tell them. "Do you know about the Elf Hunting incidents happening outside the forest?"

"Yes. The village chief told us about them earlier..." my dad answered. I could tell the sudden shift in topic made him suspicious, but he answered anyway.

"Some time ago," I said, "I was kidnapped by some lowlifes involved in the matter."

"Wh-what?!" Their eyes widened in shock and they leaned in closer to me, looking exceedingly concerned.

I paid them no mind. Just kept talking. "If I had more power, then maybe I'd be able to carry on without worrying Yuri. Maybe I could've handled myself better in a fight... So you see, I want that power back. I need it."

"But, ah, Lia," said Mom, "do you suppose you could just stay here, now that you've come back? If you did that, you wouldn't have to endure such horrible dangers. You'd be safe."

She wasn't all wrong. This village was safer than the outside world, for sure. Elves were often targeted outside our woods, and maybe I couldn't ever live safely out there, but...

"I refuse," I said without hesitation, shaking my head. "When I left the forest and got to know the wide world outside, I was so *moved*. The world is so much freer than you know, and so welcoming to me. There have been hardships and pain—of course there have—but in a way, that makes it all the more rewarding. Even fun, sometimes. The world inside me is expanding."

Memories of my travels came flooding into my mind. None of those things would have been possible if I stayed holed up inside this

forest, growing stale and sad.

“I’m sorry to tell you this,” I said, “but I don’t plan to stay in this forest. Never again.”

“Hmph. Is that all you want to say?” said my dad, glaring at me. I managed not to look away, somehow. If I couldn’t talk back here and now, I wasn’t much of an elf.

No, I’d say whatever came to mind. And maybe it came out awkward, but I’d go with it. “Maybe you both think I’ll be safe if I stay in this village and don’t get my abilities back, but a threat like the Elf Hunts might still come here. You can tell me—you can tell yourselves—that there’s some perfectly safe place, but it’s not this one. I don’t think it really exists. And I’m not going to waste my time pretending it does. This is *my* life.”

When I was a child, my dad and mom had kept me safe. Now Yuri had been protecting me, but could I accept that? I couldn’t expect Yuri to protect me forever. My heart ached merely imagining Yuri getting hurt for my sake. No, I had to become strong—strong in battle, yeah, but strong in spirit too.

“Hey, Dad. Mom. I’m seventeen. I know I might look like a child to you, but I’m an adult, and I want to choose my own path. No, I *will* choose my own path.” And *I* would be my own protector. The thought burned in my heart, good and true. “Mom, Dad...now you’ve got to choose: your faith, or your daughter?”

Ugh, no, what had I done? That was too far for sure! I mean, their faith was obviously more important to the both of them, right? They’d just ignore me now. Ignore me again... I...I could feel my breathing getting ragged.

“Elgis, don’t you think that’s enough?” said Mom, breaking a silence that seemed to last an eternity. She had a warm, gentle smile on her face, a face that hadn’t changed a bit since my childhood.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Then...Dad smiled warmly too?

“Eh? Um. What’s going on?” What did those smiles mean?

“If we appeal to the village chief directly about restoring your ‘Wind God’ ability, we’ll most likely be chased out of the village. We just put on a little show to know for sure...to see if this was really what you wanted.”

“Mmhm. And I feel you’re so serious that it’s almost painful. You’ve really grown up.”

The two of them looked at me so tenderly now. The mood in the air had completely transformed from a few moments ago. I couldn’t grasp what was happening.

I just stared at them in bewilderment. “Huh? But your faith? Your faith has to be...more important to the two of you than...than me, right?”

“More important than our daughter? No, Lia. Never.”

What was happening right now? My mind raced like crazy inside my head. I was more important to them than their faith? Me? But that...but...

“We were wrong,” said mom. “We thought we had to protect you, Lia, at all costs, no matter the sacrifice. But before we even realized it, you started making your own way. You’ve grown up, Lia.”

“Your mother and I support your choice, Lia. We’ll go with you to talk to the village chief.”

“It looks like it’s time for us to let our daughter go.”

Mom and Dad came in and hugged me tight.

“Elgis and I will always be with you,” said Mom. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Lia. You’re more than important to us than anything. Our pride and joy.”

“D-Dad... M-Mom...”

My parents’ words flowed gently into my heart as they hugged me. Some knot of darkness inside me melted away in their warmth and their words. Then, after maybe ten seconds, twenty seconds, maybe more—after hugging me for a long time, at any rate—the two of them stood back up.

“Lia. We’re sorry. We were truly horrible to you.”

“Yes, we...we’re failures as parents. An apology won’t make up for what happened, but we are truly very sorry.”

And Dad and Mom, they...bowed to me. Deeply. It was the first time they’d ever bowed to me like this, and I was shocked. Suddenly the two of them looked so small. Somehow, I understood that—and I don’t mean this in a bad way—that the two of them weren’t gods or anything.

They were just ordinary elves. Just other people, like me.

At the same time, I was surprised, because...I could see into their minds now. I paid no attention to the dryness of my mouth. I swallowed some spit, felt my throat moving up and down. Now I could know what they thought of me. What they *really* thought of me. In order to take a step forward, with my own will...I'd use my ability.

And.

"What's wrong?!"

"Lia! Are you okay?!"

My eyes got hot. I couldn't help but look straight up. Their hearts, they brimmed with repentance and a love that surpassed even that. My dad and mom had loved me. Loved me then, and loved me now. It wasn't disgust clouding their hearts, it wasn't anger...it was the overwhelming tides of guilt for ignoring me.

"Yes...I..." I looked forward, holding back my tears. "I'm okay. I am."

They'd agreed to let me regain my abilities and to go on traveling. It was so sudden, such a shock, that I might suddenly die. I'd wondered if I wasn't showing my parents the daughterly respect they deserved, but they were still graciously sending me on my way, even as they were worried about me.

So I smiled at them both. "Dad. Mom. Thank you for giving me life. I-I'm so happy to be your daughter!"

They burst into tears. They stared at me, faces wet, smiles wavering and disheveled from crying, sniffing.

"You, ah, oh, you've turned into such a fine young lady before we even realized it!"

Thank you, Dad. I was too embarrassed to actually say it, but when I was a goofy kid, I really did think dumb stuff like "I wanna marry my daddy."

"She's our daughter, Elgis... Ah, of course she would be, right?"

Thank you, Mom. I'd never imagined my mom, who was always so tough, thought so much of me that her voice would quiver as she spoke of me. I hoped she'd forgive me for being so rebellious.

And now there was Yuri to think about. To fight together with. To

stand beside. When I got my abilities back, I'd help him just as much as he'd helped me until now.

With that in mind, I raced to go tell Yuri that I'd finished my conversation with my parents.

"Oh, Filia, how'd it go?"

"Great! They agreed to go with me!"

"Right on, Filia, you did it!" he shouted happily, as if just hearing it was sunshine for him.

That made me happy, too. Looking at his face, I felt my shoulders getting lighter, my mood brighter. I held up one finger in front of Yuri's face.

"Yes, well, of *course* I did it. But there's just one problem..."

"Problem? What?"

"I'm terribly exhausted after telling my parents my true feelings and having a general personal revelation—all that stuff. So how about, for a nice change of pace, I look at you with my eyes rolled back so you can only see the whites of my eyes?"

At that, Yuri's cheeks suddenly twitched. Jeez, how rude! Here I was, giving him an exceedingly rare view of the transcendently beautiful elf Filia with her eyes rolled all the way back, and that was his reaction? I—

All right, I just wanted to see him smile. I wanted Yuri to know some of the happiness I felt when I was together with him.

"Um, Filia? I really wish you'd stop doing that, if you could."

"On whose authority, Yuri? Eh? *Ehh?*"

"Didn't you just ask me if it was okay?"

"Ta-da!" Without answering his question, I widened my rolled-back eyes and leaned in close.

"That's not a change of pace. That's terrifying!"

At that moment, I realized two vital things:

First, when I rolled my eyes back like that, I couldn't actually see Yuri's face to know if he was smiling. Second, judging from the tone of his voice, Yuri wasn't happy about it. If anything, he was seriously skeeved out.

Mission...failed...

Oh well. It was already getting late, so it was about time to get to bed. All in one night, I'd grown up a little *and* learned that everyone's a critic.

Chapter 14: Sudden

WHEN FILIA RETURNED, she told me Elgis and Fira had agreed to help her get her abilities back.

“This is it!” shouted an enthusiastic Filia. “This is the day. I’ve made up my mind—let’s all go to the village chief’s place!”

We accompanied her, all four of us making our way to the village chief Elfeit. A massive moon cast the night in a faint white glow.

We weren’t going to a house, but to somewhere in the forest. The chief had immediately increased the number of people put on guard duty when we told him about Misery Mosery, and he himself had taken the lead in guarding the area.

“Dad, Mom, I’m going to be magnificent!” said a rather fired-up Filia. Her two parents, following behind her, smiled and nodded.

Oh, hey—Filia wasn’t speaking so formally with her parents, was she? I didn’t really have any way of knowing what kind of conversation they’d had, but I was glad to see them getting closer again, like they were in the old days.

“Oooh, and I’m going to show Yuri the magnificence of my rebirth too. Eh he he he!”

“What is *up* with you?”

She’d been strangely super excited since she opened up about her abilities.

“Lia sure is cute, isn’t she?”

“Yes, Lia is adorable!”

“Eh he he! I am, huh?”

Ohhh. Her clueless parents were gonna build Filia up till she got carried away with just about *anything*. I needed to reel her back in a bit before she started causing trouble. Mission...begin!

I walked up alongside her. “Hey, Filia.”

“Ah, hello there, my good sir. What is it?”

“I was just looking at you, thinking about how you’re always sleeping like a kid,” I said in a gentle voice, looking down at my palms. “And I thought of something. See, I’ve always received incredible blessings from my muscles by training them, so I was just wondering, how much of that can I give back...you know?”

“Muscle...blessings? But that doesn’t have anything to do with me, does it?”

“If you’re really asking, then, no, it doesn’t. But: muscle.”

“What do you mean ‘but?’”

Huh? Didn’t she understand sentence structure? “Wow, okay, that’s unexpected. ‘But’ is a word that you use when you follow with something that negates the clause that came previously.” What an accurate and easy to understand explanation, as is the great talent of an intellectual muscle man. I was sure even Filia could understand. “Did you learn a lot?”

“No, um, it’s not that I don’t understand the meaning of the words themselves, but...”

“If there’s anything else you don’t understand, just ask me. I’m your partner, so I’m always available if you’re in trouble.”

“I sincerely appreciate the kind gesture, but I don’t know how you’re supposed to help anybody in trouble when you have absolutely no sense of direction.”

“Hold on, aren’t you the one with no sense of direction? The only reason we met was because you got lost in the forest, Filia.”

Filia sighed. “How long are you going to keep saying that?! Just forget about it already!”

Fira, watching us from behind, had a gentle look on her face. “You two get along so well. Don’t they, Elgis?”

“Hrm. It’s too soon for them to get married, though! Lia, it’s far too soon!”

When had anybody brought *that* up? It seemed a little early for Elgis to be going senile!

Soon enough, we found Elfeit at his post in the forest, wearing the same robes he wore during the day. He looked to us and spoke, his voice calm and flat. "I see the Windia family is here, and the human is with them. What business do you have?"

"Noble village chief, I'll be blunt: It's about my abilities. We—"

"Breeeeeeee!" A high-pitched whistling cut through the air, cutting Filia off. Everyone in the group paled—except for me.

Fira glanced about. "Th-that's the emergency signal?!"

So that's what it was. But what was the emergency?

"We'll talk later, all right?" said Elfeit, looking in the direction of the signal.

Filia nodded. "Yuri, let's go!"

"Of course!" I was already running. What if Misery Mosery had appeared? I wasn't gonna miss an opportunity to fight an opponent like that. I didn't know how strong he was, but he had to really be something.

I ran through the forest as fast as I could, not caring if anyone was following behind. Whatever was going on, whoever had made that sound was in a pretty dangerous situation right now, and I wanted to help if I could. With that in mind, I went at full speed.

And there it was, this grotesque monster the likes of which I'd never seen before, attacking a crowd of elves. The monster's black body stood in contrast to its six white limbs. It tried to swallow an elf with a sharp, toothy mouth.

"Hooah!"

No point in a "Hi." I just rushed in and punched the monster. I glanced back the way I'd come, but there were still no signs of Filia and the others. Oops—by running at full speed, I'd pulled way far ahead. I'd have to defend these elves on my own for a tick. Not exactly my specialty, but it wasn't like I could complain to anybody about it right now.

"Hey, you okay?!" In the meantime, I checked to see if the nearly swallowed elf was conscious.

The elf responded to my call, his eyes fluttering weakly. "Y-yes..." Still conscious, then. "Be careful..." he continued, "...the poison...it..."

“I understand. You just concentrate on staying conscious. As for him... He’s mine.” I fixed my gaze on the monster.

“Huarrrghhhssssh...” The monster repositioned and let out a bizarre roar. Its white legs stood out eerily in the night-cloaked night. I tried to get a sense of the monster’s strength, make sure it couldn’t get the jump on me. Seemed like a nasty fella; there were no signs of any other monsters in the area—maybe he’d scared them off.

“So it’s one-on-one, huh? Should be fun. Let’s have a go!”

“Hhooarrrgh!”

I ran at the monster. It skittered in close with its six legs. Was it faster than me? Hrm. I guess it’d come down to power—I clenched my fist and took a swing.

Our two shadows flew past one another—and one of them burst open.

I sighed and glanced down at the monster’s ruptured corpse. It was strong—maybe even Rank B in terms of power—but it wasn’t hard to deal with mano a mano. Two or three of ’em, now *that* might’ve been something to worry about.

The poison pouch in the monster’s body had ruptured as well. I was now covered from the head down in dripping purple liquid. “So, this is the poison, huh?”

The elf that had collapsed called out to me. “Hey, you okay?! The poison...”

He didn’t need to worry. “Eh, don’t worry ’bout it. I’ve trained, so I’m fine. Worry about yourself, my guy.”

His wounds weren’t deep, but it seemed like the poison had already seeped in. We’d have to get him treated fast.

Just then, Filia and the others caught up.

“Yuri, are you okay?!”

“I’m fine, Filia. Don’t worry about me. Help this poor fella. Seems like he’s been poisoned.”

“Got it!”

Filia set about curing the collapsed elf with her recovery magic. White light surrounded him, and in the blink of an eye, the elf’s complexion improved. He’d be fine.

As Filia treated the elf, Elfeit stared down at the tattered remains of the monster. “This is the same kind of monster from back then...”

“You know it?”

“This one here is about two or three times smaller, but I’m sure of it. A monster like this nearly destroyed our village a few years ago.”

Right, Filia had mentioned something like that before—the one the traveling adventurer had taken care of, who’d inspired her to go adventuring herself.

“Most likely,” Elfeit continued, “this is the spawn of that beast, left behind after its death. It only just so happened to come by now.”

“I see. So this had nothing to do with Misery Mosery then, yeah?”

“Exactly.”

Hm. I guess I could accept that, but...it still wasn’t good. I ground my teeth, keeping my mouth closed so no one could see. The battle had been over so fast, my body was starting to throb all weird. I couldn’t help it!

“Gather the injured,” said Elfeit in a commanding voice. “Let’s return to the village at once.”

Aw man, but—if I could’ve fought Elfeit right then, that would have been tons of fun. Maybe if I just—wait, nope, I had to be patient, for Filia’s sake! Had to...be...patient...

“Noble village chief, what was the sound earlier?!”

“Nothing to worry about anymore, I assure you.”

When we returned to the village, and people flocked around us—or rather, around Elfeit.

“Calm yourselves, everyone.” Just a wave of his hand seemed to ease the nervous crowd. “Yes, the alarm you heard earlier signaled a monster attack. It was the spawn of the monster that attacked the village all those years ago, but there is no need to worry. It has been slain at the hands of this human. The wounded have been fully healed thanks to Filia’s recovery magic.”

With the explanation out of the way, Elfeit turned to me. “As village chief, I must offer you my thanks.”

“Nah, no need to thank me. What I’d like is for you to listen to Filia.” Filia had been interrupted before, after all, after hyping herself all day for this. I was sure she wanted to get everything out of the way as soon as possible.

The village leader nodded. “Very well... Let’s talk.”

Filia, facing Elfeit directly, full of resolve, bowed and opened her mouth to speak. “Noble village chief...please restore my abilities.”

But maybe she bowed too quick, because Elfeit replied at once. “Unacceptable. Are you trying to sully the name of our Almighty Wind God?”

Filia choked up, falling silent. In her place, Elgis and Fira stepped in and bowed to Elfeit.

“Please, noble village chief!” said Elgis.

“Please, restore this girl’s abilities to her!” said Fira.

The people of the village looked shaken when Filia’s parents joined in. The very idea of defying the village chief shocked them. Even Elfeit looked down at them with a slightly surprised look. “Surely... surely you two understand what you’re asking me, don’t you?”

They didn’t answer. They simply kept their heads down.

“Dad, Mom...oh, noble village chief, please listen to us!” Filia bowed once again.

But Elfeit was firm. He didn’t even move. A stalemate.

“Come on, isn’t it all right to just give them back?” said a voice in the crowd. Just a villager, someone who’d gathered in response to the emergency. But at his words, a ripple ran through the crowd, like a stone had been tossed into the water.

“Yeah,” said another. “they saved the village. If she asks you a favor...”

Another: “She helped us working in the fields. Besides, those abilities are hers, right? We should let Filia do what she wants!”

“Yeah! If Filia says she wants them back, wouldn’t it be good to give them to her? My husband was on guard—she saved his life with her recovery magic!”

The stream of support became a great river, and now no one could stop it. Everyone—everyone in the entire village—spoke up, voicing their agreement.

“All of you...” muttered Elfeit.



The village leader shook his head.

“Well, I suppose that even if I refused, no one would listen. Very well,” said Elfeit, sounding defeated. Then he turned away from us and declared to everyone in the village: “Filia Windia. I will permit you to regain your ‘Wind God’ and ‘Clairvoyance’ abilities.”

That was it, then: In that moment, Filia had accomplished what she’d set out to do by returning to this village.

Good for her! I felt a little useless, but that was fine. I really just wanted to congratulate her for settling this on her own.

“Th-thank you very much!” Filia stammered.

Elfeit nodded, still standing with his back to her. “The magical tool we used to seal away your abilities has been kept at the shrine. Elgis knows where it is. He can accompany you.”

Filia nodded. She and Elgis readied to go amidst a joyous crowd. Everyone raised their voices to congratulate Filia, when suddenly—

“Huh?!” Elfeit roared. “What in the world is that?!”

I scanned the surroundings, but I couldn’t sense anything particularly unusual. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t—?!” Elfeit shook his head. “Something’s coming!”

“What?” And finally, I felt it too. “I see!”

About a hundred meters away, an unusually concentrated power blazed like a sun to my senses—probably someone’s magical energy. And it was getting closer and closer to the village. It was strong, probably even stronger than that majin I’d faced.

It didn’t feel *natural*, not like a monster. It gave off this kind of thick, murky aura, emanating with the meaningless slaughter of countless innocents. It was him. It had to be.

The man of Sinmarch. “Crazy Face” Misery Mosery.

“I’m going. Filia, get your folks out of here and take shelter.” Talk about bad timing. Ugh, couldn’t he have waited till after Filia’s big moment? “All of you, scram! He’s coming!”

The elves ran, taking refuge from the oncoming presence. Elfeit and I ran through the crowd, against the flow, until at last we were confronted with the source of this enormous mass of power, the

slaughtering presence.

“Nice to meet you, heathens,” said the tall man. A revolting mask adorned his face. It was a deep, scarlet red, carved with an expression of perfect agony. A scent wafted through the air from the mask, and I knew it wasn’t dye, but blood. The blood of dozens. Maybe hundreds.

“Who are you?” demanded Elfeit.

“Oh? I suppose an elf who chooses such a remote little hidey-hole wouldn’t know of me. Please allow me to introduce myself: I am Misery Mosery, a humble follower of the Great Dark God. Some charming people call me ‘Crazy Face.’”

“Irrelevant. What is your business in this village?”

“Hm? That should be obvious. You see, I am here to slaughter heathens. My dogma demands my hatred, you see, of those with pale skin and long ears. I speak of a purge. I speak of a purification of filthy blood, stained by your heretical religion. Oh, what’s wrong? You aren’t worried, are you? Come now, won’t you respect my doctrines? Petty, meaningless slaughter is the creed of my Great Dark God, and I am but a good little sheep.”

“Silence, young fool. You’ve insulted the Almighty Wind God. Do you expect to live? Your life will be cut short before you can offer a word of repentance.”

Tension hung and grew as the two glared sharply at one another. Which, come on! What was I, chopped liver?

Chapter 15: “Crazy Face” Misery Mosery

“W^{AIT},” I cut in, “I’m getting in on this too.”

These guys were in their own little world, being all dramatic at each other, and that wasn’t fair! What kind of torture was this, not being able to jump into such a fun-looking fight?

“Join in or don’t,” Misery Mosery said. “It matters little to me—you’re all dead regardless. The outcome remains the same. The world must end.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Anyway, I’m in.”

“Boy,” said Elfeit in a low voice, whispering in my ear, “it pains me to say this, but I need your help. Not all the villagers have gotten to safety yet. If we lose control of this situation, it will be trouble.”

Yeah, he was definitely the village chief for a reason. Well, I wasn’t interested in more lives being lost than

necessary. Okay, we’d prioritize the evacuation of the elves before we fought. That seemed pretty straightforward.

Aw man, I was still feeling real fired up after my battle with the monster earlier. Maybe this Misery Mosery guy could give me a little fun.

“Whisper what you will, it matters not. You’re dead men walking.” Misery Mosery pointed his arms at me and Elfeit both, one arm toward each of us.

“Wh—” Something I couldn’t even see flew toward me, and I leapt to the side. It grazed my cheek, and warm blood trickled down.

I sensed death in that moment. I didn’t think there was any way I could’ve blocked whatever that was. His ability?

“Oho, the impertinent heathen has some *moves*, doesn’t he? If you’d just be obedient, you’d die easier,” said Misery Mosery in the musical, admiring tone of a pet owner pleased to see a trick. Irritating bastard.

“Take a page out of your friend’s book,” he added. “He knows how to take a hit when he deserves one.”

“You—what did you do?” A cleanly bisected wall of earth stood before Elfeit—he’d thrown it up to defend himself. Had he failed somehow? Though he’d moved quickly enough to avoid a direct hit, blood poured from his torso, staining his immaculate white robes.

“Your weak defenses couldn’t hope to stop my ‘Blade of Nothingness.’ It is impossible to defend against. This most powerful of abilities, sweetly granted to me by the Great Dark God, will enable me to bring this world to its end.”

“Wow, dude, you’re pretty goddamn stupid.”

I couldn’t stop myself. I mean, that was just too much, you know? What absolute idiot stood around openly blabbing about his own ability for everyone to hear? Apparently the kind who’d stand right in front of us in his super cool and definitely not tryhard mask.

Misery Mosery stopped moving, and his look of pure rage seethed even through his mask. “You...you mock me? Mock *me* and you mock my *God*. Such transgressions cannot be forgiven.”

He hurled another Sharp Thing of Not Stuff or whatever right at me. I ducked with perfect timing. Not a scratch.

“You... What did you do? What *is* this?”

“Nothing special. Just the result of earnest training.”

First of all, the Blades of Nothingness (ugh, of course I remembered the name—it was just grossly edgelordy!) weren’t all *that* fast. I mean, no matter how “impossible” to see something was, I’d been constantly training myself to sharpen my senses. If I could feel the wind as it moved, I could dodge. Maybe he could’ve caught me by surprise at first, but now? Come on!

“Sorry, it’s over.” I rushed him, trying to get in close for a punch.

“Don’t you dare look down on me!”

He blasted a fireball at me, but that was nothing. I plowed right through, taking the shortest distance between point me and point jackass.

“Your arrogance will get you killed,” he snarled.

“If you think you can kill me, just try!” I shouted back.

He launched three Blades of Nothingness right through the fireball. So *now* he wanted to catch me by surprise, huh? *Kinda* clever, I guess.

“That ain’t gonna stop me.” I leapt through the air and went flat, slipping right between the blades. No backing down. I was going to keep it up, get in, and pound him.

“*That* is what I meant by arrogance, heathen.”

“Huh?!”

A Blade of Nothingness suddenly changed trajectory and hurtled right at me. I struggled to kick through the air and get away, but my air speed wasn’t fast enough, not to dodge that blade.

“Great Dark God, I deliver this soul unto you. Shower it with your usual mercy! Annihilate it completely.” Misery Mosery prayed.

Damn! How could I get cornered by a guy who calmly closed his eyes and muttered a prayer in the middle of a fight? I might have to lose a limb again if I wanted to win this.

No sooner did I think that than I heard Elfeit’s voice. “Hm!”

My body suddenly launched up into the sky. “Uh?”

The ground bulged up, and my body was lifted higher and higher. The Blade of Nothingness glanced off a pillar of earth—right where I’d stood moments before. I twirled into the air, putting some distance between me and the blades, and the tower of earth collapsed. The blades flew toward me for a moment before breaking form and disappearing.

Looked like they had about a thirty-foot range in a straight line—not very far. If I were more used to fighting guys with that kind of range, I could’ve probably handled the rest easy. Then again, there was no way I’d come out alive if I took a hit from one of those blades head-on.

“I thought you were in danger, so I lent a hand,” said Elfeit. “Perhaps that was unnecessary?”

“Nah, thanks for the save.” He was still alive, huh? I’d thought for sure he was dead.

“You have spared a life marked for annihilation. You... How can you not see the splendor of the Great Dark God and His teachings?!”

Misery Mosery shrieked, tearing at his own mask. Blood flowed from his mask as he scratched and tore, and he made a hideous, grating sound.

Kzzzzzzzzzzzzzt...

"I put my faith in the Almighty Wind God, and no other. Our God is nothing like your bloody, narrow-minded demon," Elfeit snarled.

Suddenly, the ground beneath Misery Mosery's feet rose up and surrounded him. Was this Elfeit's earth magic?

"Quick, boy—finish this!"

"On it!"

I closed the distance between myself and Misery Mosery once again. Amidst the clamor from the trees—they'd stopped their "doon" sounds and were humming now, as if listening to our battle—I heard the murmuring voice of Misery Mosery through the wall of dirt he was trapped within.

"O Great Dark God, you've come for me. I'm so glad you've come!"

Wait, what in the world was this guy going on about now? Was he

"Back, boy, get *back*! His magical energy is swelling!"

The wall of earth exploded. From the dust and rubble emerged Misery Mosery, soaked in blood. Crimson flowed steadily from behind his mask, poured out, soaking his clothes a sick, sticky red.

"Great Dark God...you've come. Great Dark God...you've come." Misery Mosery's voice was louder than before, shriller. Even though he wobbled unsteadily on his feet, I saw no clear opening for attack.

"I'm getting a real bad feeling," I said, "like things just got interesting."

"It matters not what manner of monster we face. So long as the Almighty Wind God is our ally, victory belongs to us."

My heart beat harder and harder, pumping hot blood throughout my body in time with my emotions. Oh yeah, I was in a fight to the *death* right now. The thrill I felt, it was like I could be dead the very next moment. Time compressed. My body shuddered.

"Don't you think that's enough stalling?" I asked.

Elfeit nodded. “Yes. I’m sure most everyone has evacuated safely by now. We no longer have to fear getting the villagers involved.”

“Cool. Time to give this everything I got.” I clenched my fist.

This. Was. *Awesome*. Oh *yeah*, I was fired up. The sound of my heart made me feel so *alive*. Yeah, this was living! This was what it *meant* to be alive!

I kicked off the ground and propelled myself toward Misery Mosery.

“Great Dark God...let’s kill them all. Let’s kill and kill and kill, one by one by one, until we find there are none left. The more I kill, the more virtuous I become. Rotting world, reeking. Make it right. Fix it, one by one,” Misery Mosery babbled that and more while sending another Blade of Nothingness attack flying my way.

The speed of his attack was way faster now, and seven blades careened toward me—he’d really upped his game, huh?

I grinned. What a nice pace. Good effort. Wouldn’t be fun otherwise, heh.

“*HOOOAAHHH!*” I pounded the ground, used the surface like a shield—

“Great Dark God...”

—and, using the ground as a distraction, dodged behind Misery Mosery. The blades seemed to lose track of me too, flying on straight ahead.

“Sleep, monster!” Elfeit roared, unleashing lightning magic on Misery Mosery.

Oh, right, forgot about that guy a bit. Well, with this distraction—if I was gonna hit this jerk, it had to be now! I swung my fist, not making a sound.

“Great Dark God...aaaaahhhHHHHH—H—H—H!”

Misery Mosery didn’t move his body at all, just his neck. It rotated 180 degrees to face me.

No, I was still faster, right? No hesitation, no hesitation—it was clobbering time!

“Hooah!” I swung my fist with all my might—but a wall of earth met my punch. I pierced through and hit—no. I didn’t get Misery

Mosery. That bastard, he'd used the same trick I had, huh? Made the wall a distraction. "Tch."

Blades of Nothingness flew through the walls of earth, chipping away at the dirt. I had no choice but to retreat. I couldn't tell where they were coming from, couldn't come up with a plan...that ability of his was just too vicious. I mean, really, wasn't there any defense?

"Nggaah! Nggaaaaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha! O Great Dark God, I am reborn!"

In fact, I didn't see any wounds on Misery Mosery's body. Yeah, he hadn't been damaged at all.

"By the will of the Great Dark God! By His will! This world will be shrouded in darkness! Born into meaninglessness, born only to die, such is our only commonality, see?! I bring meaning to your death. Show you how to die in a way that pleases Him. You—don't you understand that?! Heathen trash. Slime on my boot," Misery Mosery rambled nonsensically.

"Listen, boy: No matter how many times you rush in, you're not going to get any results like that. And I went through all the trouble of setting him up for you." Elfeit waved his hand in disgust.

"Shut it. You haven't damaged him either."

"That's because there's a pesky little human fly flitting about. It's too much of a distraction for me to launch a real attack with my magic."

Wait, was he calling me a pesky little fly? "You an idiot or somethin'? Be serious, hit him already. I'm not dumb enough to get hit by friendly fire."

"Hm. Very well, boy. Feast your eyes upon what I, Elfeit Mistral, can do with my power unleashed!" Elfeit roared, his robes fluttering, as he summoned a cascade of thunderbolts. "Hm!"

Elfeit's lightning magic shone so brilliantly it dazzled, and with a crackle of thunder, it came right down on Misery Mosery.

"Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God Great Dark God—ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha haah!"

Misery Mosery barely seemed to notice. He unleashed another salvo of his Blades of Nothingness and cut through the lightning itself.

“Bothersome. But a beast that has cast aside its intelligence cannot hope to beat an elf.”

As Elfeit said that, his lightning magic swirled and sparkled, and then it transformed into a dragon. The lightning dragon gazed down at Misery Mosery from above.

“The Great Dark God desires the lives of trash! Not precious lives, but *your* lives!” Staggering, wobbling, Misery Mosery aimed his blades precisely at the dragon—and at us, too. He moved like a master of the Drunken Fist style of martial arts. His wild movements meant we couldn’t pin him down, couldn’t get him with just any magic.

But Elfeit didn’t have just elemental magic. No, he had complete control of his *divine* magic, and more than half of the spell rained down on Misery Mosery’s writhing body.

“Boy, go ahead and deliver the finishing blow.”

“Of course!” I was about to start running when I felt a surge of energy in the ground around me—Elfeit’s earth magic. The ground swelled and sent me flying toward Misery Mosery.

“Brr brr brr brr!” Misery Mosery whipped his head round and round, making an awful sound as he spun once, twice, thrice.

The lightning dragon whipped its head between me and Misery Mosery before ramming into the latter.

“Ngghhhaaaahhh!” Misery Mosery’s dull, black eyes gazed at me from behind his mask, fixed *only* on me. He formed ten blades around him, and at once all of them shot after me.

“Tch!” With ten attacks on my tail, I had to focus on dodging. Two of the blades hit my arms and legs, cutting into my body. My well-trained muscles, normally like armor for me, couldn’t help this one time.

“Ah, Great Dark—!” Misery Mosery screamed and was abruptly cut off.

I dodged the last blade he’d thrown and whipped around. He’d taken a full hit from the lightning dragon. Still looked fully conscious to me, unfortunately. Even if he was unsteady, the intensity of the aura emanating from his body remained unchanged. How was he moving like that even after a wallop with that level of lightning magic?

“Hooah!” My stance wasn’t ideal, but I threw another blow to

Misery Mosery. All my muscles worked in concert with each other, and there was a kind of elegance to my strike. Although Misery Mosery had incredible offensive ability, it didn't seem like he really had that much in terms of physical durability. No way could he get through a full power punch unharmed—

“Hhhhhghh ha ha ha! Heee hee ha ha hee hee heeghhh!”

Or not. I furrowed my brow. There sure was a big hole in Misery Mosery's stomach now, but, uh, from the way he was dancing around, it was almost like it didn't bother him at all.

Come on, who in the world could possibly move like normal when they had a hole in their stomach?! Even I would have a little trouble after that!

“Hey, boy—what is he?”

“That's what I wanna know. Hey, Elfeit. Was that lightning dragon you just cast your full power?”

“Yes, though it appears it couldn't render a fatal blow. How troublesome.”

“Can't you use your ability again?”

“If I could, I would obviously have cast it a long time ago.”

Seriously? Well, in that case, I was gonna have to go back to whaling on him.

“Skreee?” Misery Mosery leaned forward. I could almost hear the sounds his neck made as he moved his neck like a bird's. “Kree skreeee?” He seemed more like a beast than a human being.

“Kraaahhh—hrrraaagghhh!” Round and round, till suddenly he launched a Blade of Nothingness in a seemingly random direction.

“No!” Elfeit bolted, horror in his face.

What was he so worried about?

Then I saw it. Two elf children in the path of the blade. I was so absorbed in the battle that I hadn't even noticed the kids. Big mistake.

“Great Dark God, I send heathens unto you! Tear them apart! Please, do it!” Misery Mosery wailed in a high-pitched voice as the Blade of Nothingness hurtled straight for his victims.

“Not on my watch!” Elfeit roared. “Every child of this village is a

child of the Almighty Wind God!”

Elfeit threw himself into the path of the blade. It hit dead on.

“Are you okay?!” I shouted, even knowing he wouldn’t be, couldn’t be.

The blade ripped into Elfeit and kept going.

Why hadn’t he used another one of his earth pillars, dammit?! Probably because he was too drained, or panicked, or—it didn’t matter, the blade was going to keep hurtling toward the kids. It was gonna hit them. If it did, Elfeit’s sacrifice really would have been in vain.

But it wasn’t. The blade was stuck—trapped. Face twisted in pain, Elfeit had grabbed the invisible back of the blade with his own hand while it was caught midway through his torso. He gripped it with a shaking hand. “I won’t let you...lay a finger...on a child of the Almighty Wind God...not on a child of *my village!*”

The blade remained lodged in Elfeit’s body for a moment. And dissipated. He shouted at the children to run—and they did. Good. My turn.

I lunged toward Misery Mosery again. You need any advantage you can take on the battlefield. And I needed this guy gone or Elfeit was toast.

But Misery Mosery no longer paid any attention to Elfeit. He only had eyes for me. He didn’t give me a chance to get in any closer.

“Ugh, come on, man. Can’t believe you did something so stupid!” I spat without thinking.

“So long as I believe in the Almighty Wind God, I cannot abandon the faithful. Such a thing is only natural, to put faith over my own life,” said Elfeit in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, all with his stomach torn to shreds. Every time he spoke, he coughed up blood.

Man, this—this *idiot*. Then again, he was a man of heart. He had a strength I didn’t. Yeah, he was the reason Filia had been cast out, but I couldn’t tamp down a faint respect growing for Elfeit. Conflicting emotions boiled inside me, but I pushed them away. No, I had one enemy right now. He stood in front of me.

“Let’s do this,” I said calmly. I was gonna get payback for Elfeit. I looked straight ahead at Misery Mosery, this zealot guffawing and dripping blood, and I clenched my fists.

Just then, I sensed a powerful presence coming from behind. A familiar one? Yet different, somehow.

“Yuri!”

“Filia!”

Filia came rushing in to support me, but this wasn’t the same Filia as before. Just a glance into her eyes told me enough: She’d regained her abilities. Those silver eyes of hers, those eyes that had looked so oddly fragile before, blazed with power.

Filia saw Elfeit lying on the ground, covered in blood, and rushed over to him in a panic. “Chief Elfeit?! I’ll heal you right away!”

“Filia...don’t. Focus on him...on defeating him. He’s a threat to us all.”

“But!”

“We don’t have time to discuss this.”

“Skree caw! Caaww! Open your hymn books to the last page! Bash your head till the pews run red, it’s time for the Kill Everyone Festival!”

Misery Mosery launched a fireball. Must’ve been fifteen feet in diameter, easy, and probably loaded with Blades of Nothingness inside. I couldn’t protect Elfeit alone.

“Filia! Shoot wind up from below, with your full power!”

“Got it! Let’s go. ‘Wind God!’” Filia shouted.

An eerie, lightning-quick wind swept around her, Elfeit, and I. The wind gradually took shape, surging and reforming into the form of a massive woman. The speed of its formation, the pressure emanating from its massive body, they were far beyond what I’d seen during the magic battle tournament.

“Hyaaaaaah!” Filia screamed. The wind raged up from the ground with impossible fury, sending the fireball flying harmlessly up into the sky.

But five Blades of Nothingness still shrieked through the air toward us.

“Here!” I took aim at the back end of a blade and struck. My fist and the blade collided, and the blade was knocked upward into the sky. “I knew it.”

How stupid of me to take the words of my enemy at face value. Impossible to defend against? As if. The only impossible part was the *front* end of the blade. If you hit the back, you could intercept the thing. I wouldn't have known if Elfeit hadn't made his desperate grab earlier.

If Elfeit hadn't risked everything for us... Well, like hell was I gonna let that go to waste. We were definitely going to settle this, here and now.

"Hooah!" I launched all of the blades up into the sky, one by one, in the same manner as before. "Now, Filia!"

There was nothing in our way, not anymore. I let the plan take shape in my mind, knowing Filia could read my thoughts—she nodded.

Good. I jumped toward Misery Mosery. "Hooah!"

"Haah!" As Filia shouted, the giant wind woman pushed my body from behind. My body, propelled by the swirling tempest, hurtled toward Misery Mosery.

"Great Dark God! Help me! Bestow your blessing upon me! Eeek!" Misery Mosery tried to fire off another Blade of Nothingness, but Filia mimicked my method from earlier and launched the blades off course with swift wind attacks. The blades flew harmlessly away.

"Damn heathens!" Realizing he couldn't defend himself using his blades, Misery Mosery walled himself up with earth magic. It was the same thing he'd done before, but back then, I hadn't had Filia's Wind God to back me up.

"Eat this! HOOAH!"

With all my strength, my fist collided with the wall of earth, smashing through until it made impact with Misery Mosery's masked face.



“Khgrh...” Blood gushed through the cracks in the wall of earth.

Huh. I'd thought there was something strange when I punched a hole in his stomach. He'd just stood up like it was nothing, pranced around like he didn't feel pain.

No human could move like that with an injury of that nature, but he had. Which meant he wasn't human. Not as such.

“Your real body is that mask, huh?”

The mask shattered, and all signs of life in Misery Mosery vanished.

“We won, huh?”

I looked at my right arm. The bones, snapped to pieces, my muscles, torn. Not in great shape. I'd just gotten this baby healed, and now I'd wrecked it all over again. I could worry about that later.

“Filia, heal Elfeit!”

“I'm working on it!” But even though Filia used her recovery magic, the blood poured endlessly from Elfeit's body. “Wh-why isn't it stopping?!”

“Enough, Filia... Surely you understand. I'm already dead.”

“No...”

Elfeit slumped. He turned his face to me and said, so quietly, “Boy...fight me. Fight me to the death.”

(Elfeit's POV)

I, Elfeit Mistral, was born into this world 650 years ago. When I was born, I was a considerable disappointment to my people. Despite my ancestry, descending from an ancient line of village chiefs, I had no significant abilities. Worse yet, I am a man. The Wind God is a woman, and so the truly devout followers of the Wind God religion view women

as superior to men. And yet I, a man, may be the only truly devout believer in this village left. As pitiful as it is ironic.

My ability was, of all things, Underwater Breathing. One can imagine how useful such a power is in the depths of a forest. Because of this ignoble fate, ever since I was very young, I had been plagued by a small, recurring doubt that wriggled in the back in my mind at all times.

“Does the Almighty Wind God hate me?” Proudful, I suppose, to think the Almighty Wind God would bear any feelings at all toward a single elf. But my abilities were so irrelevant, so contextually weak, and I thought myself so terribly unfortunate to be a man. I couldn’t stop nursing these doubts.

And then Filia was born.

I knew the moment I saw Filia that she had received the blessing of the Almighty Wind God’s love. As time passed, Filia’s abilities at last manifested, and indeed, she was found to possess dual abilities: Wind God and Clairvoyance.

For the first time in my centuries of life, I felt angry with the Almighty Wind God.

Why would She bestow the Wind God ability—said to be the incarnation of the Almighty Wind God Herself— upon Filia? I had worked ceaselessly for the sake of the village, and yet!

I issued an order to the people of the village to ignore Filia, half out of pathetic desperation. A repulsive order it was, born of vile jealousy and boundless self-regard. Filia’s parents begged me to rescind it, but I did nothing.

That day marred me. I had veered from the path of the Almighty Wind God’s teaching and inflicted an indelible wound on a single girl.

“Chief Elfet?! I’ll heal you right away!” A high-pitched voice reached my ears and brought me back to the too-bright world. They say your life flashes before your eyes when... Well, that’s what they say.

I felt a throbbing, searing sensation in my stomach, causing me great pain. Hm, right. I suppose I had acted in accordance with the teachings of my god and saved those children, hadn’t I? “Help whoever believes in the Almighty Wind God,” such is Her command.

Respect for that law was absolute, far more critical than respect

for my own life. I suppose I was far from qualified to talk about such things now. Seconds after Filia's arrival, the masked man attacked me.

It was then that I beheld a miracle.

Filia, clad in the form of a giant made of wind, was unmistakably the figure of the Almighty Wind God Herself. Her silver-white hair fluttered in the wind, divine beauty made flesh. The Almighty Wind God rendered divine punishment unto that masked man. Upon witnessing that spectacle, I was borne down by the weight of my sins.

Ah, my Almighty Wind God, I sealed you away. What could be crueler? What could be lower?

"Wh-why isn't it stopping?!"

Filia, her abilities released but her form as normal as it could be, healed me to no avail. The wound I had received was most certainly fatal, but more importantly, I no longer had the will to go on. All that remained was a desire for atonement in the eyes of Filia and of the Almighty Wind God Herself. Atonement that I knew well I could never truly reach.

Perhaps. But in the Wind God faith, deeds carried out in your final moments, right before death, are regarded highly. I had risked my life to save those children. Surely the Almighty Wind God would look down favorably upon me.

And yet.

No, I couldn't be forgiven. Even if She forgave me, I would not forgive *myself*. I refused redemption.

As I struggled to hold on to the faint light of life, I just barely managed to squeeze those words from my throat: "Boy...fight me. Fight me to the death."

"A fight to the death?"

For a moment, I thought I'd misheard Elfeit, but the look on his face told me I hadn't mistaken him.

A fight to the death... But why? I mean, I didn't particularly mind getting the chance to punch the guy, but Elfeit couldn't really mean it,

not in his current condition. Yet he staggered up, unsteady on his feet, even while Filia tried to stop him from moving.

“Chief Elfeit?! You can’t, not now. Besides, isn’t a fight to the death blasphemous in the eyes of the Almighty Wind—”

“Precisely. I care more for the Almighty Wind God than anyone, and I am proud of that fact. For that reason, I cannot allow myself to be by Her side.”

Where Elfeit got this power, I didn’t know, but he slowly approached me, one step at a time. Even as blood gushed out of him in amounts way past lethal, Elfeit just didn’t stop.

“Boy...no, Yuri, was it? Yes, Yuri. Please. Accept...my last request.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

I had to. Sure, I had no clue what was going on with the guy, and I could never forgive him for the awful way he’d acted toward Filia, but... I couldn’t just ignore his request as he stood there facing me, fueled by sheer willpower alone.

“Yuri?!”

“Filia, he’s staking his life on this request. I can’t stop it, and I won’t.”

Even though Elfeit’s stomach was split open, he closed in on me with palpable determination. My hair stood on end. There was no way I was gonna miss a chance to go up against this kind of opponent. When Elfeit was about thirty feet away, I held my fists out.

“Let’s do this, Elfeit.”

“I am in your debt, Yuri.”

Elfeit, too, slid into a fighting stance. The tension, which had ebbed after the fall of Misery Mosery, rose again. I couldn’t say I was feeling peachy keen, but Elfeit was on death’s door. And I couldn’t afford to lose.

“Phew.” Elfeit let out a light sigh, softening the ground I stood on, making it difficult for me to keep my footing. I jumped as quickly as I could, high into the sky. My ribs throbbed with pain. I ignored them. This wasn’t the time to wallow in agony. It would be disrespectful to Elfeit if I let my meager wounds get to me.

“Let’s go!”

I kicked through the air and dove toward Elfeit. Lightning magic rained from above, but I dodged, hopping left and right. The lightning stopped—an opening—and I moved in. A few more rounds like that, and I got right up in front of Elfeit.

“It’s over,” I said.

“Not yet.”

Elfeit changed his stance, switching from a magician’s posture—leaning slightly forward and not really focusing power anywhere—to thrusting his right arm out toward me and adopting a form fit for close combat. I’d never seen that pose before, but it was pretty impressive. A fist fight with me, huh? Interesting.

Instead of using my right arm, which was useless by then, I swung my left, and with all my strength. *All* of it.

“Let’s do this! Hooah!”

“...”

Our fists met—and Elfeit was blown away. His body sailed tens of feet back, snapping through some trees, before falling to the ground.

Filia ran over to Elfeit. Then, a while after, she came back to me.

“He’s gone.”

“I see.”

I stared intently in the direction Elfeit had sailed. In the moment before our fists clashed, I had heard Elfeit’s final words:

“Take care of Filia.”

What in the world did he mean by that? Elfeit hated Filia, didn’t he? He’d never once dropped his stern attitude toward her, not even at the end. It was hard to imagine he’d turned over a new leaf and changed his mind about her in such a short time. But...

“What’s the matter, Yuri?”

“Nothin’.”

I walked over to Elfeit’s body. He had a sour look on his face, but somehow—somewhere in that—I thought I saw satisfaction. Well, whatever Elfeit intended by those last words, I snorted.

“You don’t gotta tell me that,” I muttered into the wind.

I would protect Filia. It didn't matter if I had to face off against Sinmarch or whoever. But to do that, I *had* to become stronger. I *would* become stronger. Stronger and stronger. This I vowed to Elfeit. More importantly, I vowed to myself.

Chapter 16: Setting Off on a Journey

AFTER “CRAZY FACE” MISERY MOSERY’S attack and the death of the village chief, Elfeit Mistral, little by little, life in the elf village returned to normal. Elfeit was given a funeral service the day after his death—cremation. It was customary for elves to burn the corpse with fire magic and let the wind carry the ashes away. I guess everybody mourns different.

Elgis, who’d already had important responsibilities in the village, was chosen as Elfeit’s successor and inherited the position of chief. Since Elfeit didn’t have any blood relatives, the bloodline of the village chief—after seemingly endless generations—had come to an end. Even though it sounded like they’d still be following the teachings of their Almighty Wind God, they were also cooking up plans to actively interact with outsiders.

And so there I was, a week after all the drama, sitting in Filia’s room. It was the first time I’d been in it since we’d come to the village, actually.

“We’re going to be leaving soon,” Filia had told me, “so I don’t want to forget anything important. Yuri, can you help me look for something?”

But we’d already finished everything important, and we were just kind of lazing around now.

“Ah!” Suddenly Filia let out a little shout.

“What’s wrong?!”

“You simply must take a look at this, Yuri. Isn’t it adorable?” said Filia, holding a cat-ear headband. “Yuuuuuri?”

“Filiaaaa?”

Filia put it on her head. “Does it look good on me?” she asked, curling her hands like cat claws and holding them in front of her chest. “Meow, meow? What do you think, meow?”

“Your calculating nature knows no bounds.”

“Meow!”

Filia got closer and closer to me, until she was finally close enough to start poking my feet. Jeez, Filia. She didn’t show any sign of stopping.

“C’mon, Filia, you’re real close. Back off.”

“Aww, are mew all empurrassed meow, Yuri?”

“I have no idea how you can say that kind of thing out loud, But shut up and lemme do my muscle training!”

She’d hit the nail on the head, so I decided I *would* focus on training. I was in splendid form, too, doing two consecutive backflips with just one pinky finger and a thrusting motion. Who knew? Maybe this technique would be useful in combat one day! This training method killed two birds with one stone. Granted, I hadn’t found it useful yet, but just one time would be enough. Could you imagine how humiliating it would be if I ever needed to do two consecutive back flips with my pinky and then thrust, and *couldn’t* pull it off?

I’d never forgive myself.

“Yuurii? Meow, meow?”

Must...ignore...Filia. Ignore...ignore. She wanted a reaction, because she *always* did, and then she’d tease me again.

After a few minutes of me giving her the cold shoulder, Filia puffed out her cheeks in a huff. “Mmph... Well, since Yuri doesn’t think I’m a cool cat anymore, I’ll check myself out in the mirror and see how cute I am.”

“Meow, meow meow? Meo—”

Filia suddenly stopped moving. Uh. Had something happened?

“What’s the matter?” It probably wasn’t worth it, but I figured I’d react just this once.

“Th-there’s...” Filia stammered, “...a catgirl angel in the mirror! Sh-she’s way too cute...”

Wow. I'd expected it to be bad, but I hadn't expect it to be *that* bad. The worst part was that it worked, and she had my attention. I had been thoroughly, completely owned.

"Oh no, Yuri, what is a poor catgirl to do? I'm quite simply too cute. I've become a victim to my own meow-velous charms!"

"Why don't you take it off then?"

"I-I suppose I shall..." Her face beet-red, Filia took off the headband.

I don't even know if Filia knows what she's trying to do half the time.

After Filia took off the cat-ear headband, she handed it over to me for some reason. "Okay, Yuri."

What? What in the world was this about?

As my mind raced, Filia said. "I've worn the legendary cat ears, Yuri, and now it's your turn."

"What kind of reasoning is that?"

Was this, uh, a thing? With who? And why?

"Come on, you can't tell me that you're not a *little* curious about how you'd look, Yuri. A cat-ear headband and a muscley Yuri? It's like fire and ice: polar opposites."

Well, if she was gonna go hard on this, I supposed I might as well.

I put it on my head and unleashed my muscles.

"HOOOAAAH!!!"

"Oh my goodness, you killed it. You killed the cuteness. That shout... Gosh, there isn't a shred left." Filia looked pretty taken aback at the sight of muscley, cat-eared Yuri.

That didn't seem fair! Wasn't she the one who'd wanted me to do this?

"Do I look strong?"

"Well, ah, that isn't precisely the word I would use, no. I'll certainly say that you don't look like the sort I'd want to come near me. At all. Especially at night."

"Hmm. In that case, good." So it was like weighted training clothing but for *intimidation*. I could still terrify opponents, even with

cat ears. But I wasn't really in a catboy sorta mood, so I took 'em off.

"If you like them, I'll give them to you, okay?" said Filia.

"Nah, it's not quite clicking with me..." I graciously declined Filia's offer and then, with a couple last backsprings for my workout, we left Filia's room.

"He he he he. I'm shuddering at my own cuteness again," said Filia as we headed downstairs to the living room.

"Ah, I see. Well, congratulations?"

"Heh. No need to congratulate me; my cuteness is its own reward!"

We found Elgis and Fira waiting for us. "I heard a tremendous shout from upstairs," said Elgis. "Did something happen?"

"Oh, you mean the shout from Yuri earlier?"

Oh, right, I guess I could get pretty loud. Had I disturbed the neighbors? "Oh, I was just being a cat. Sorry if it was a bother."

Fira blinked. "Is that...is that a cat sound...?"

Filia and I took a seat across from her parents at the other end of the table, catching up one last time. Filia and I were leaving the village that afternoon after all, so it was going to be a while before she'd see her parents again. I hoped they were having a nice goodbye.

For their part, Elgis and Fira were reminiscing passionately about Filia's first words.

"I'll never forget the first time Lia spoke. 'Dada! Hungy!' Sorry, Fira, but she spoke to me first—I'm clearly Lia's favorite parent."

Fira chuckled. "Oh, is that what you thought? You were out hunting at the time and didn't know this, but Lia's *actual* first words were 'Mama! Hungy!' *I'm* her favorite parent, Elgis."

"N-no way..." Elgis went pale with shock.

I didn't think it made much difference who a literal baby talked to first, but I supposed it was a different story from a parent's point of view. Filia also liked it and was blushing slightly.

"You were kinda a glutton, huh?" I said.

"W-well, I think it was quite mature of me to be so focused on nutrition at such a young age. Anyway, uh...Dad? Mom? Can we stop

with these stories? Or at *least* tell them more accurately. I'm sure I was way more proper in my...food...inquiries..."

The mental wall between Filia and her parents seemed to have vanished. Filia no longer spoke so stiffly with her parents. Hearing her get all casual with them was a little weird at first, but I suppose it was weirder to be uptight with your parents all the time. When I thought of it that way, I quickly adjusted to it.

"Oh, that reminds me!" said Elgis. "I found the photo album. It was pretty deep in a closet, so I had a tough time finding it." He brought out a magnificently decorated red book and blew off what must've been years and years of dust from the cover.

On our first day here, he'd mentioned "a Filia-photo-viewing contest" or something, so it seemed related to that. Anyway, Filia's parents couldn't help but want to show their kid off to others.

"All right..." said Elgis dramatically. "Here we go." Elgis opened the book, and there they were: tons of photos from Filia's childhood, neatly laid out on the pages.

"Hey, Dad? How come I didn't know about this?"

"Ah, I suppose you wouldn't have, eh, Lia? That's because it only has pictures of you from when you were three and four years old. Our magitool broke after that. It's a real pity."

Fira laughed. "That's because you took too many pictures of Lia. Over a hundred a day!"

"Well, Lia was growing bit by bit every moment. It's only natural I'd want to keep record of all the Lias!" The incredibly high-strung Elgis snorted excitedly—man, he was hyped. There was something about Elgis that reminded me of Babandongas, honestly. You know, in the way they doted on their loved ones.

By the way, a magitool is pretty much what it sounds like: a tool made by using magic—like those crystalleyez they used during the magic battle tournament. I don't really know the principles behind the things, though, not that it would matter if I did. No magical power and all.

"These are all really from Filia's childhood?" Wow, Filia really did have a pretty face even when she was a kid, huh? Just an adorable little girl.

“Look, doesn’t she look so cute in this picture?” Fira pointed to a picture of a very young Filia, who had a broad, flowery smile on her face.

Okay, yeah. That was a pretty cute one.

“Oh, but this one! This is my favorite.” Elgis pointed to a picture of little Filia using wind magic. She had this really dignified look on her face, with a hint of nervousness in her eyes.

“Oh my, this one is cute too.”

“Hey, doesn’t our Lia look almost like a goddess in this one?”

“Oh ho ho ho, look at Lia’s little cheeks, though! They’re all puffed out! I think it’s probably that picture we took of her when we made her wait to have a snack.”

“She couldn’t get enough strawberries back then, eh? She’d say the things like ‘I’m gonna be a strawberry when I grow up!’ all the time.”

Okay, this had to stop. C’mon. Filia was trembling from sheer embarrassment; it was gonna kill her.

But they didn’t. In fact, her parents showed me every single picture in the photo album. I kinda drifted off in the middle, thinking about what kind of training I was going to do later, all while training my eyes by trying not to ever close them. (People are always training, even if they don’t know it.)

Once we finished looking through the photo album, we got ready to depart.

“You know,” Filia mused, “I suppose I really *was* adorable. Who cares if anyone else sees that?”

“Well, yeah. With you being that cute and all, I didn’t get why it mattered at all.”

“Oh my.” Fira put her hand over her mouth and giggled softly.

As for Elgis, he was suddenly glaring at me with a deep distrust.

Glaring? But why?! I’d just complimented his daughter!

“It’s going to be so lonely around here with you two gone,” lamented Fira.

“I think,” said Filia, “that things are probably lively enough

around here with just the two of you, Mom and Dad.”

She wasn’t wrong; those two were always full of energy, that was for sure.

“You think so?” said Elgis. “I suppose it’s because we love each other so very, very much!”

“Oh, darling, really now!”

The two of them started, er, flirting, I guess? Though they were middle-aged, they still looked like a beautiful young couple. The whole thing was weirding me out; I averted my eyes as they whispered sweet nothings to each other.

“What’s this? Oh, Yuri, you’re surprisingly innocent, aren’t you? Eh? Eh?” said Elgis, taking notice and teasing me.

Filia nodded. “Yes, Yuri is incredibly innocent, isn’t he?”

“No, uh, I’m normal!” I insisted I *am* normal, right? “A-all right, I guess we’re headin’ out.”

Man, just the thought of it was getting me a little emotional, to be honest. Coming to this village had made me want even more to be stronger than anybody else. When I got back to the rest of the world, I’d for sure immerse myself in my training every single day. I was already psyched just thinking about it!

“Take care, Lia.”

“You come back home whenever you want.”

“Okay. Okay, yeah!” Filia wiped a few tears from her eyes, but there was so much joy in her face too. I was so glad she got to reconcile with her parents. Her expression had gotten so much softer somehow.

Elgis and Fira bowed deeply at me. “Yuri, please take care of Lia.”

“She might be a little naïve, but she’s a good girl. Please be good to her.”

“As you wish,” I said, returning their bow. I swore to myself that I’d never let Filia be sad. “Okay, Filia, ya ready?”

“Dad. Mom. We’re off!”

At last, Filia and I left the village, and Elgis and Fira waved enthusiastically at us until they were out of sight.

We'd made it safely through the forest by dawn of the next day, and from there we approached a great vantage point—a place where we could really keep an eye on our surroundings and spot any enemies. With most of my brain thus occupied, the rest of my brain started to wander.

Lia, huh? Could *I* call her that?

Nah, probably not. Pointless to think about that stuff. Better to think about muscles.

“Yuri!”

“What?”

Standing in front of me, Filia looked up. The corners of her mouth curved into a grin. “It’s okay. If you call me Lia, I mean.”

“Hey, you peeked into my mind, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t. I looked at your face, Yuri, and guessed that you were thinking, ‘Lia, huh? Could *I* call her that? Bwa ha ha, hee hee hee.’ That kind of thing.” Filia crossed her arms behind her back, swaying gently from side to side.

Wait a minute, she *definitely* peeked into my head, right? And what was with the dramatization, giving me that perverted laugh and all? What did she want right now with this psychological warfare?

“But you’re surely far too innocent, Yuri, to call me by a pet name.”

“Am not!” I blurted. I couldn’t help it, not after Filia said something like that, especially not with her index finger on her lip, looking up at me like she was *trying* to provoke me.

“Well, give it a try, won’t you?”

“F-fine.” I took a deep breath.

Filia kept grinning at me. I had to calm down. Compared to battle, this was a cake walk. I wasn’t about to get wounded, my life wasn’t in danger... So why was my heart beating so fast?

“Lia! There. There, I said it.” But why was it so embarrassing? What was this?

“Eh he he, Yuri, your face is totally red,” said Filia, looking just as red as I did.

“Shut up. I’m leaving you behind.”

“Hey, wait, Yuri!” Filia followed after me as I started to run. “Are you embarrassed, Yuri? Hey, are you?”

“No way, no how.”

“Oh my, you’re blushing again, aren’t you?”

“Am not! Ugh, I’m never calling you that again!”

My voice echoed out through the expansive, cloudless sky. A sudden wind blew, softly caressing our cheeks, heading off into some other place. A new and unbound wind, sweeping away to parts unknown.



Bonus Chapter: Remembering Names Is Surprisingly Difficult

THE MINUTE Filia and I opened the doors to the guild, we heard a young boy's voice.

"Please!" he shouted. The boy looked young and pretty innocent, aimlessly roaming around the guild while clutching a request form. He kept going up to different people and bowing his head, begging them for help, but no one was accepting his request.

"Hey, Filia, whaddya think?"

"Why don't we at least go hear him out?"

We didn't know what the boy—and dang, he was so *young*—was doing, but his desperation was plain to see. Most of the adventurers seemed to turn him down apologetically, so at least he wasn't being shunned or anything. Our minds made up, Filia and I approached him.

"You want to go into the Boon Forest and pick some flowers?"

"Mhm! My mom's birthday is the day after tomorrow, and I wanted to give her a flower called a Sun Flower. My mom gave me one a long time ago, so now I wanna give her one, along with a letter. But my mom's always telling me that it's dangerous to go into the forest, so I came to the guild, and..."

A waste of effort. He'd been rejected by everyone, huh?

"Please. I'll give you all my allowance!" The boy banged his head against the desk, pleading with us. He clutched some coins in his hand. Putting out a request was by no means cheap, but the boy seemed to have enough money to pay for it. Considering the amount, he must have been saving for months. What a good kid, thinking so much about his parents.

"Hmm..." In terms of rank, this wasn't really a problematic request, but. Hm. I couldn't really see why anyone *would* refuse this kid's request, which made it weird that so many had. Ehh, it didn't matter.

"Sure. We'll accept."

The young boy's eyes lit up. "Y-you're sure?!"

"Yeah. Let me and Filia handle it."

"Th-thank you very much! I...well, thank you so, so much!" The boy stammered, overcome with joy.

"Are you sure about this?" Filia whispered during our short walk to the guild counter. "We don't even know why everyone else turned him down."

"I don't think I could say I'm moved or anything, and maybe that's 'cause I don't have a family myself, but I kind of admire people who do stuff for their folks, somehow. Maybe that's it."

At that, Filia smiled kindly. "I see. My own relationship with my family is somewhat, you know, complicated after everything that's happened... But that's exactly why I love seeing a family doing well."

As we talked, Filia and I submitted the request to the girl at the counter. She looked up from the form to stare at each of us intently, one at a time. "Are you really going to accept this request?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Several people have issued reports of a gigantic monster appearing within Boon Forest for about a week now. After reviewing their testimonies, the guild has concluded it's most likely a mid-to-low A-Rank monster, a gagagastripe. It is quite the dangerous request. Are you sure you'd like to accept?"

Ah, so that was why everyone else had turned this one down. Well, a small fry like that wasn't much of an obstacle for us. If anything, the chance to fight a powerful monster was a bonus. I was dynamite, and just hearing this lit my fuse. "Not a problem. Right, Filia?"

"Well, yeah, I can handle it."

Heh, good to hear. We accepted the request like we'd planned and made our way to Boon Forest.

When we arrived, we got to work on the request right away. Of course, I'd already unleashed my muscles in preparation to fight a powerful enemy. (They were looking as wonderful as ever, thanks for

asking!)

“All right. Let’s find some Sun Flowers. And uh, maybe that gargleblaster-whatever...seeing one of ’em would be nice too.”

“It’s obviously better if we don’t run into one, though. Also, ‘gargleblaster-whatever’? It’s a *gagagaspikes*. For goodness’ sake, Yuri, you just forget things right away. You’d be completely hopeless without me,” teased Filia, poking my cheek with her finger.

Ah, yeah, yeah, I see. It was called a *gagagaspikes*, huh?

A, uh...*gagagaspikes*?

“Hey, Filia. Wasn’t it called ‘*gagagastripe*’?”

Filia’s face stiffened. She turned away, almost creaking as she did so, kinda like a magic soldier that had run out of magical energy.

“Y-yes, of course, that’s what I *said*. That’s right.”

Uh, nope, Filia, you hadn’t. It was called a *gagagastripe*. Sure, Filia was always pretty useful to me, but, uh...

I wasn’t sure what to say, so instead went with: “You’re always so dependable, Filia.”

“What was that? Was that sarcasm?! Are you sarcasticking me?!”

“It wasn’t sarcasm. It was muscle,” I replied, giving a little flex to prove it.

“Ugh. It makes me sad to the point of tears when someone like *you* points out my mistakes...” Wow, so impressed by my muscles that she was moved to tears...almost embarrassing.

Anyway, as we chatted back and forth, we continued on through Boon Forest. The monsters there weren’t very dangerous, by and large; if we ran into any monster other than the *gagagastripe*, I could win with my eyes closed.

The, uh, or no, *was* it *gagagaspikes*?

“Just forget about it already...” said Filia, replying to my thoughts in a voice so quiet it was almost silent.

“Why? You yourself said it was *gagagaspikes*, didn’t you? And I’m incredibly grateful to you, Filia, since you’re always so dependable. What else could I expect from the transcendently beautiful elf girl Filia?”

“Waahh, Yuri, stop picking on me!”

We continued our search for a while, our conversation pretty much continuing like that, until I felt some kind of presence up ahead. It radiated strength.

“There’s something here after all.”

Filia and I quieted our footsteps and approached cautiously. What we saw was a huge monster, about fifteen feet tall, glaring at us with a scowl. It was a four-legged monster, with some kind of magnificent yellow-and-green-striped pattern on its body. Man, it was like, the *most* striped monster I’d ever seen. But unfortunately—or maybe naturally—there wasn’t hint of spike on the stripey, stripey pattern of the—

Then again, it *was* Filia who’d said it was called a gagagaspikes. Surely the transcendently beautiful elf girl Filia was right.

“Yo, gagagaspikes!” I said, greeting the monster before us.

“Stripe! Gagagastripe! Look, I’m sorry, I was wrong, so can you please drop it already?!” shouted Filia in a voice that might’ve been a little more on the angry side than the annoyed one. Maybe I’d teased her a little too much? Something to think on.

“Gagagaaa!” The formerly-called-gagagaspikes-but-actually-called-gagagastripe threatened us with its rather unusual cry.

“Hooah!” I slammed my fist into the gagagastripe’s torso.

It let out a “Gaga?!” and staggered. Even after taking a hit from me, his body remained intact. Whew, what a monster. Definitely Rank A.

“Yuri, I’ll handle the rest,” said Filia. When I turned, I saw she was clad in her wind giant. Wow, she was going so far as to use her Wind God ability. She meant business.

“Man, you’re really motivated today, huh?”

“I’ve built up a lot of frustration, Yuri...” Filia growled as she approached the gagagastripe. The creature was still going strong, even if it was wounded.

“Gagagaaa!” The monster let out a snarl and rushed Filia, closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye.

She didn’t seem worried.

“It’s *your* fault that Yuri made fun of me so much! Prepare for death, *insect!*” shouted Filia, before smashing the gagagastripe with a giant arm of wind.

Whoa. She did all that with pent-up feelings of total resentment. Oof. Made you feel bad for the gagagastripe.

And thus, the poor, unfortunate gagagastripe was defeated at the hands of transcendently beautiful Filia.

“All right, good job defeating him, Filia. Uh, Filia?” But Filia wasn’t anywhere in sight. She’d been there just a moment ago, right?

“H-help me, please. I can’t move...” I lowered my gaze and found Filia lying face down on the ground for some reason.

“What’s the matter, Filia? Afternoon nap?”

“You can’t think I’d really take an afternoon nap in a forest like this. Oof, it kind of feels like I twisted my leg... Ow.” Filia groggily tried to push herself up with her forearms, but with her strength drained, she just flopped back flat onto the ground.

“Hey, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“As you surely saw, I used the Wind God *spectacularly*, but I’m so exhausted now...” Filia tried to get up once more, but the moment she got her feet on the ground, she crouched back down. Her complexion looked a little worse too, a little paler. Filia’s leg injury definitely wasn’t negligible.

“You okay? You didn’t need to push yourself so hard.”

“If I didn’t defeat him right away, then you’d just keep making fun of me...” said Filia, pouting and turning away in a huff.

So *that’s* why she’d been so gung ho. “Sorry. I teased you too much.”

“You really did. If you wish to make it right with me...you’ll give

me a piggyback ride,” replied Filia, glaring at me with resentment in her eyes.

Even if her mood was only a little bit my fault, I couldn’t exactly refuse. The least I could do for an apology would be to do what Filia asked. “All right.”

I hefted Filia up and ended with a soft, gentle sensation on my back.

“Interesting, Yuri: a strong, muscle-bound man picking up a woman of peerless beauty and carrying her on his back. Why, the scenario looks positively criminal, doesn’t it?”

“It’s nothin’ to write home about.” Besides—just putting this out there—wasn’t she the one who’d asked for this? Well, she couldn’t walk, so I guess there wasn’t a point in arguing, but all the same! “Wait a minute, you can use recovery magic, Filia. Can’t you just cure your injury that way?”

“Err.”

“Hey!”

“Ahhhhhhh...hmm. Yes, I *can* heal myself, but I don’t want to waste the energy. It’s easier this way. For me, I mean,” said Filia, holding her hands over her ears and shaking her head.

This girl... Ugh, she was getting into one of those moods of hers again. Well, no biggie. Given the low rank of the monsters in this forest, it’d honestly be better training to have a handicap like carrying Filia around on my back. Kinda fired me up, actually!

Hauling Filia onward, I continued keeping an eye out for the Sun Flower, our real goal for the day. As Filia looked around with me, she started talking.

“Do you have any favorite animals or anything, Yuri? Or favorite things in general? Oh, your favorite thing is *me*? Oh, Yuri, you’re too much!”

“Give me time to answer.” Jeez, how far did she push ahead on her own? She was like an adventurer of conversation.

“An adventurer of conversation, hmm?”

“...”

“An adventurer...of *con-ver-sa-tion*.”

“Hey, stop exposing what I said in my mind out loud, lookin’ all serious like that...” I didn’t know why, but it was real embarrassing.

“Oh, but making Yuri look all flustered is my calling in life. It sustains me. I can’t help it!”

“Please, I’m begging you, find a better calling in life, and do it fast.” Seriously, she had a twisted personality, huh?

Filia replied to the bitter look on my face with a laugh. “I’m joking, it was only a joke. Sorry.”

Man, she had to straighten out that personality.

Filia suddenly pointed up toward the sky. “Oh, look, Yuri! It’s a rainbow! A rainbow!”

Oh man, that was a rainbow all right—the arch positively glowed with seven colors. Filia’s eyes lit up as she stared up at the sky, almost childlike. Nah, I couldn’t get too mad at her despite her awful personality. Not when she could admire stuff like this with such innocence.

“It’s beautiful, Yuri, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s sparkling, just like yours truly.”

“If you say so.”

We stopped in place for just a few minutes just to gaze at it.

A short while later, Filia pointed her arm out from her place on my back. “Oh, isn’t that it? The Sun Flower?”

I looked where she was pointing, and yep—flower, 10 o’clock.

“Looks like it.” I approached the flower, still carrying Filia. The Sun Flower was definitely worthy of its name. It was a bright, passionate red, so vibrant it felt like the power to live welled up inside me just from looking at it.

“Oh, I’ll go and pick it. I’d feel anxious if you did, Yuri,” said Filia, hopping off my back to go over and pick the flower, puffing out her modest chest proudly as she spoke.

I stared intently at Filia’s ankles.

“Hey, what happened to your supposedly injured leg?” I asked.

“Oh, as soon as you started giving me a piggyback ride, I used

recovery magic. I couldn't stand the pain. Thank you very much for carrying me up until now."

I studied Filia as she expressed her gratitude. And there I'd been, trying to keep the impact of my movements to a minimum as we moved forward, thinking about her aching leg. But my efforts had meant absolutely nothing at all, huh? I see, I see...

"Hm. Yuri, are you angry?"

"Nah, not really." Not at something like that. Why? Because I was a true gentle muscle man.

Buuut I was still a little frustrated, so I'd give her a warning. Not that I was angry, though. Nope.

"Walk home on your own two legs, okay?"

"That's what I was planning on. It would be embarrassing if someone saw me, the transcendently beautiful elf girl Filia, getting a piggyback ride from anyone." As Filia spoke, she picked the Sun Flower, her hand movements steady and careful. I wasn't very good at that kind of delicate work myself. I was honestly glad Filia was around to help me out with stuff like this.

"Wow!" Filia's face lit up with a broad smile as she glanced at the nearby thicket. I'd felt a presence there earlier, but I hadn't really done anything about it—whatever was there was too weak to worry about.

"What's up?"

"Yuri. Look at that monster over there," said Filia, crouching down, beckoning me over with a whisper.

Curious, I moved over to check it out, and I spied a monster covered in brown fur. It looked a whole lot like a monkey, except for the fact that its hands were disproportionately long and thin compared to its body.

"They call this monster a 'medikong.' If you give it some medicinal herbs, it'll give you various fruits in return, based on the quality of the herbs you gave it. Wow, being able to meet one like this—talk about good fortune! We're really lucky."

So it gave you fruit for medicinal herbs? "That's a weird trait."

"Well, think of it this way—when you meet someone stronger than you, you want to show them you're not their enemy. The

medikong does that by giving us a gift in exchange for a gift, though I don't know how effective it really is."

Huh. So there were friendly monsters out in the world too, huh? Deep down, I was pretty impressed. Some monsters could even think, then.

"I'm sure this monster has a much richer intellectual life than yours, Yuri."

"I doubt it. I'm an intellectual muscle man." (*And don't read my mind without permission!*)

"Yuri, Yuri! Let's give him some herbs!"

Well, okay, I hadn't really ever had a chance to barter with monsters. It was rarely a bad idea to try new things for yourself, you know, life experience and all that. Fortunately, I had plenty of herbs in the bag of holding at my hip.

"Here. Take it." I offered a medicinal herb to the medikong, who was half-hidden in the thicket.

The medikong repeatedly reached out his hairy arm and then pulled it back, over and over, until finally he snatched the herb from my hand. Then he quickly hid his entire body in the thicket. Soon enough, I heard the sound of something clattering lightly—thwack!—and a yellow fruit appeared in front of the thicket.

Oooh, banana!

"See?" Filia clapped. "Isn't that amazing?"

"Yeah. I kinda feel like we connected, somehow." I took another herb out from my bag of holding and held it out in front of the thicket. The medikong revealed himself once again and snatched the herb from my palm. Thwack. Another banana was placed in front of the thicket.

"Whoa, amazing."

I tried it again.

And (thwack!) there was yet another banana.

I couldn't help but raise my brows. "Filia? What's with all the bananas? You said he'd give out all kinds of fruits, but it's a bananapalooza here."

"Maybe...he's mistaken you for a gorilla? When someone says gorilla, the first thing that comes to mind is bananas."

“Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. In fact, I’m absolutely sure of it.”

Filia was holding her laughter in. She seemed absolutely confident. Could I really have been mistaken for a gorilla? N-no, there was no way.

“All right, one more time!” I grabbed another medicinal herb out from my bag, handed it to the medikong, and—

Banana.

“Again?!” I shouted to the heavens, forced to face the cruel reality of the situation.

But no, I wasn’t giving up!

“All right, then it’s a question of numbers! I’ll fight with numbers!” I grabbed a few bunches of herbs out of the bag and thrust them toward the medikong.

A bunch of bananas.

“Dammit! Okay, one more time! All right, this time, I’m going with real *quality* herbs. I’ll fight with quality!” I selected some especially nice herbs, handed them to the medikong, and—

An inexplicably prestigious-looking banana.

“Augh!” Seriously, what the hell was happening here? Did I really look like a gorilla to the medikong? No way, that couldn’t be. I had to find a way how to deal with this, somehow.

“Aha!” A lightbulb flicked on. “That’s it. I got it, Filia!”

“Wh-what do you get?” Filia’s cheeks puffed out as she desperately struggled to hold in her laughter.

“I gotta flip the thinking here,” I said, turning to Filia with an audacious smile on my face. “Get it? If I’m being mistaken for a gorilla, then I should do the opposite of what’s expected and just go ahead and act like one. If I do that, his mistake will be made clear. He won’t mistake me for a gorilla anymore!”

Sometimes my incredible thinking amazed even myself. This was truly the “fruit” of an intellectual muscle man. Filia’s mouth was agape. I guess even she was awestruck.

“Get a good look, Filia! Gaze upon my majestic form!”

I took off my shirt and struck an imposing half-naked stance in front of the thicket where the medikong hid. The medikong peered out from the thicket, deeply interested. After confirming he was looking my way, I spread my legs and puffed out my chest to show off my well-developed pecs.

“Ooh. Oooh ooh! Ooh ah ah?” I grunted, dangling my arms and pacing back and forth in front of the thicket. That alone might have been enough here, but I had a little something extra to seal the deal. “Ooh ooh ah ah!”

I started drumming on my chest. Then, finally, I handed over some herbs.

Yeah. Yeah, that’s the stuff! I’d done it. And now—

Banana.

“Why?!”

“D-don’t make me laugh any more, please! H-hee, m-my stomach hurts!” Filia crouched down on the ground, clutching her tummy, her face crimson from laughter.

How was this happening?! I had way prettier muscles than a gorilla, remarkably so. The world was so strange...

“Ahh, that was so good,” said Filia a while later, wiping the tears from her eyes. Jeez, she’d busted her gut.

“Damn. I gotta work out more.”

“How on earth did you arrive at that conclusion?”

I had to build up muscles that couldn’t be mistaken for a gorilla’s, obviously. Yeah, I was determined!

Incidentally, when Filia gave the medikong some herbs a minute later, it placed a basket in front of the thicket that positively overflowed with an assortment of fruits, all of the highest quality. Compared to the bananas I’d gotten for nice quality herbs, the fruit she got was way better.

“Would you look at that, Yuri? Transcendentally gorgeous elf girls are just in a different class altogether.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever...”

Filia, elated with her success, smiled cheekily. I just shook my head. She couldn’t *prove* it, ya know?

When we returned to the guild, Filia and I handed the Sun Flower to the young boy. "Thank you so much, sir, miss! This is going to make my mom so happy!"

The look of genuine joy on the young boy's face was so nice that it felt totally worth all the work we did.

"I'm glad to hear that. Oh, while we're at it, take these too." I gave the boy a handbag.

When he took it, he peered inside. "What's this? Sir, these are... bananas? Why are you giving me these?"

"Because I'm not a gorilla."

The boy tilted his head to one side, as if he didn't understand what I meant.

"What's up? You need another bag?" I asked, handing the perplexed boy said another bag.

"Wh-why are there so many...? Uh. Anyway, thank you! I'll eat these together with my mom!" said the boy, running off in good spirits, holding bags of bananas in both hands.

Off he went to his home. Another successful request, then.

"Pfft...pff he he. Pfa ha ha ha ha!"

I narrowed my eyes at Filia. "How long are you gonna laugh at me?"

"Eh he he he heeeh! It's not like I'm laughing because I want to—just—just seeing you carry around all those bananas, it's too much. It just set me off!" Filia hid her eyes with her hands, but I could see the corners of her mouth curved into a smile.

"Filia?"

"Wh-what is it?"

I removed Filia's hands from her face and brought mine in close. Then, with a completely blank expression, I said but one word:

"Banana."

“Hhk! Pfft...!”

“Baanaaaaa. Ooh, ooh ooh!”

“PPfft! Heee! Ah ha ha ha! Th-that’s cheating! I-I can’t breathe!”

Filia fell off her chair laughing and rolled around on the floor.

“You seriously have the *worst* personality!”

“Can’t breathe...eh he hee! I-I’m really gonna die! Ah! Yuri, help!”

“Like hell I will! I hate you!”

“D-don’t hate m-m-meee hee hee he he ha ha ha!”

“Stop laughing then!”

For the rest of the day, Filia burst into laughter every time she saw my face. Jeez, talk about rude!



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DORANEKO

AUTHOR PROFILE

Lives in Saitama Prefecture.

Doraneke started writing after thinking “I’ll become a novelist,” and thought that would be a fun way to give shape to their imagination and fantasies. Since then, Doraneke has fallen steadily in love with writing. In 2017, *Muscles Are Better Than Magic!* made its debut, published by MF Books.

According to Doraneke, “I wrote this story with the goal of making something fun that could make people laugh.”

Doraneke’s hobbies include listening to music and reading. They are especially fond of manga.



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